INDIGNITY by Lea Ypi

Ypi,LL

INDIGNITY

A LIFE REIMAGINED

Lea Ypi

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“Everything has either a price or dignity.”

Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*

“It is no mere poetic licence, but also philosophical truth, to call beauty our second creator.”

Friedrich Schiller*, On the Aesthetic Education of Human Beings*

List of Characters

The Leskoviku family and their circle in Istanbul and Salonica

Leman Ypi (nee Leskoviku), a woman born in Salonica, the author’s grandmother

Avni Bey Leskoviku - Leman’s father

Ismet Hanim - Leman’s mother

Mediha Hanim - Leman’s paternal grandmother

Ibrahim Pasha - Leman’s paternal grandfather

Shefikat Hanim - Leman’s aunt, Avni Bey’s sister

Gustav Heym - a German businessman

Cocotte - Leman’s cousin on her father’s side and best friend

Doctor Elias Levy - the family doctor

Dafne - Leman’s nanny and family maid

The Ypi family and their circle in Tirana

Asllan Ypi - Leman’s husband

Xhafer Bey Ypi - Asllan’s father, 10th Prime Minister of Albania (1922-23) Chairman and Plenipotentiary for Justice of the Provisional Administration Committee (April 1939)

Zafo (Xhafer) Ypi - Leman and Asllan’s young son

Enver Hoxha - Asllan’s friend from school, founder of the Albanian Communist Party (1941), first secretary of the Albanian Labour Party (former Communist Party) until his death in 1985

Ahmet - Asllan’s cousin, a friend of Enver and member of the Albanian Communist Party

Wandeleur Robinson - Asllan’s friend, British writer and military figure, connected to British intelligence operations in Albania during World War II

Eliot Watrous - Asllan’s friend, a major of the British armed forces, head of the Albanian section of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a British intelligence service active in the Balkans during World War II

Brigadier Edward Hodgson - Asllan’s friend, head of the British Military Mission in Albania in 1945

The Tribune - informant for the Albanian Security services

A note on titles. In Ottoman society, *Pasha* was a title of high rank or office often granted to governors, generals, admirals or other important figures in the Empire’s bureaucracy. *Bey* referred to a lower-ranking noble or provincial leader, and *Hanim* was an honorific used to address or refer to a woman, signifying respect, often akin to “lady”.

A note on Albanian pronunciation.

Xh (as in Xhafer or Hoxha) is pronounced J like in the English word “jam”

Ç (in Çim) is pronounced Ch like in the English word “chain”

Y (as in Ypi) is pronounced with an elongated u like in the French word “tu” or in the German ü (über)

PART 1

PROLOGUE

THE PHOTO

“I’m looking for the secret service archive”, I say as I approach the first taxi parked on Paris Commune, one of Tirana’s bustling streets, connecting the city centre to its outer ring road. I hesitate to call it *my* street, even though it has been my address in Albania for more than twenty years. Already when we moved to the capital in the mid-Nineties, the question “you’re not from here, right?” came up with nagging regularity every time I struck up one of those casual conversations with strangers that appeared harmless at first, but soon turned awkward.

Most people returning to Tirana emphasise how much it has changed: there are now more highrise buildings, paved roads, cafés, bars, and cycle paths. For me it is a place of grief, guilt and endless what-ifs. I have no happy memories of the place – at best dispassionate associations to news items, communist-era films, and, more recently, traffic jams. The longest stay I endured in the city was when my grandmother died and I returned from my studies in Italy to organise the funeral arrangements. Alone in the kitchen during the obligatory forty days of mourning, I struggled to accept that after decades of teaching me the importance of following rules, she’d vanished from my life without a word of warning. I had once told her that I would return to care for her, just as she’d cared for me throughout my childhood. It was now too late - I could no longer keep that promise. Tirana became the capital of remorse and, perhaps to ease my guilt, I blamed the city. It was afflicted with a curse, a capitalist hex after the communist malediction. She should have never returned to Tirana, fifty years after being exiled to the countryside as an enemy of the communist state...

“I’m looking for the Authority for Information concerning Documentation of the Former State Security Service”, I say, this time specifying the office in the same formal way it had introduced itself in the email inviting me to an appointment.

The taxi driver seems not to hear me. A grey-haired man in his seventies, his face drawn and hidden behind thick, dark sunglasses, he wears a checked short-sleeved shirt and a red “Make America Great Again” cap. Loud music blares from his car radio tuned to Top Gold - a station that plays old classics. As I stand in front of the yellow Mercedes Benz waiting for his response, I recognise the sound of *Only You*, struggling to beat Lady Gaga’s *Just Dance* from the taxi parked behind. He’s not listening to the music, which has clearly been chosen to attract a certain kind of customer, but smoking and absorbed in a newspaper that covers the entire steering wheel.

“Sir, I’m looking for the Authority for Information concerning Documentation of the Former State Security Service”, I repeat.

I must sound worried, or at least agitated, because my tone prompts the driver to finally look up, switch off the radio, toss the unfinished cigarette out the window, and turn to me with an expression of mild concern.

“Avash avash. Take it easy. Take a seat. Who’s that you’re looking for?”.

“Oh”, I mutter, caught off guard by his failure to recognise my destination. “I’m looking for the office with all the files. You know, the former Sigurimi archives”.

“You’re not from here, right?”, he asks, as the car engine roars to life, and we begin making our way through the busy morning traffic.

I smile, trying to hide my irritation. I wish I didn’t have to take a taxi. I wish I knew how to cycle to the archive and wouldn’t get lost in all the small alleyways that run through this city like misplaced veins. Instead, I’m barely able to navigate even Paris Commune, the neighbourhood that supposedly is my own. Perhaps part of me unconsciously wants to stay lost, to remind myself that I never truly belonged, and it’s now too late to remedy.

“I wonder what gave that away…”.

“You said you’re going to the *former* Sigurimi archives. That’s foreigners’ talk. There are no formers here. It’s all the same people. My daughter, she lives in Florida, comes once a year. She also claims it all looks different”.

I want to explain I never meant it in that way but there is no natural break in his words.

“I’m old, I used to be an import-export truck driver, travelled the world before everyone else, I was in Poland, in Krakow – do you know how many times…”

He pauses to let out a long whistle, as if he wanted the sound to travel the distance from Tirana to Krakow and back.

“The sunglasses are from those days, I like them, they make everything look dark, with a little red glow. Trust me, nothing has changed, it’s all the same as it was.”

“This has changed though, hasn’t it?”, I say, pointing at the endless line of cars stuck at the red light just before the turn onto Four Heroes Street.

“They can’t drive them”, he replies with the evident satisfaction of someone accustomed to crushing such a superficial objection. “Every day I think I’ll be killed. Wouldn’t it be better if they just walked? As we all did, back in the day. Now they inhale this toxic poison every morning, then, in the evening, they pay for yoga and the gym”.

“Other things have changed too”, I say, just to see how he will respond. “Look at all those new trees the Mayor has planted”.

“Ha, you’re just like my daughter!”, he exclaims. “She only comes for New Year’s Eve, there’s some sort of Christmas deal with the airline. And she falls in love with the lights on the trees. Have you seen what happens here in winter? There are so many lights you’d think there’s a war. All because of the Christmas decorations. Come at any other time, and you’ll see it for yourself – nothing’s changed, it’s all the same people. Even the trees know it”.

I’m still mulling over the favourite game here, “is it the same, is it different?” when, suddenly, he slams on the brakes and, with the window rolled down, starts cursing at other drivers as he attempts a U-turn. We’ve just passed Ethem Bey Mosque, turned left onto George W. Bush Street, and are approaching Joan of Arc Boulevard when he decides to change course.

“I just remembered something,” he says, once the manoeuvre is complete. “You want to go to the new office, right? The one they moved to recently?”

I shrug. “Not sure,” I reply, pulling out my phone to double-check the address.

“Dear Dr. Ypi,” the email reads. “I am writing regarding your request no. 736, submitted on 10.05.2022, in your capacity as a researcher, to access documentation from the former State Security concerning citizens Leman Ypi (Leskoviku), Asllan Ypi, and Xhaferr Ypi.

In accordance with Article 36 of Law no. 45/2015 ‘On the Right to Information concerning Documentation of the Former State Security of the Socialist People’s Republic of Albania’ (amended), Law no. 9887/2008 ‘On the Protection of Personal Data’ (amended), and the guidelines ‘For Researchers/Media’ approved by Decision no. 24.09.2020, the Authority has decided to make the following documentation available:

a) Documentation from File no. 531 concerning citizen Leman Ypi, 34 pages
b) Documentation from Fund 1, Investigative-Judicial file no. 1355 concerning citizen Asllan Ypi, 666 pages
c) Documentation from Fund 1, Investigative-Judicial file no. 1384 concerning citizen Xhaferr Ypi, 138 pages.

Please bring an ID card with you, as it is required by the security protocol for entering the premises of the Skanderbeg military garrison, where the Authority has recently relocated.”

Signed,
Specialist Employee of the Authority for Information Concerning Documentation of the State Security.

I take my eyes off the screen. When the email first arrived, reading it made me shiver. Now, I find reassurance in its formality – the fact that each time I check, the content remains unchanged: come for an appointment on Tuesday, bring an ID, ensure the fee has been paid in advance. I particularly appreciate reviewing the names of family members — my grandmother, my grandfather, my father — the way the list of people is offered to me like a meal-deal, in a spirit of commercial detachment that is just what I need at this stage. Nothing to feel emotional about, just the secret lives of a random group of people to whom I was assigned at birth, like specific food items on a discount.

I turn to the driver:

“I have here: unit 4, Skanderbeg Military Garrison”.

He nods with confidence. “Yes, yes, that’s the one. They moved there recently. There was some grant from the Swedish Embassy or the Swedish Government, or perhaps it was Denmark. One of them, the Great Powers. Actually, now I remember, it *was* Sweden – would you believe it?”.

He raises his eyebrows, then a thought strikes him and the tone shifts abruptly.

“It took these people twenty-five years to make the files accessible. Not the Swedes’ fault obviously – they have no idea, they just give the grant, tick a few boxes, done. I mean us, the Albanians. Twenty-five years since the fall of communism”, he repeats, followed by the same Krakow whistle. “Obviously, they were waiting for all the spies to die, so they didn’t have to punish anyone. Told you, it’s the same people”.

He pauses to light another cigarette.

“Are you going there for work or fun?”.

To rescue my grandmother from the trolls, I think. To talk to her. To feel less guilty. To discover why she was smiling in the photograph–the one taken in the winter of 1941, in the depths of the war–and to know if the smile was real. To find the truth or try to imagine it. To discover who spied on her. To find the honeymoon photos. To write a book. To see if the past is already history, or if it is not history yet. To see if nothing or everything has changed. Or perhaps simply I must go, without knowing why. To make myself feel better. Or worse. Or the same.

"For fun", I say.

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The photo, an old black-and-white image, was posted on social media by a man with the username Çim, probably short for one of the communist-era names Shkëlqim (Splendour) or Ndriçim (Enlightenment) – a person whom I had never met, or even heard of before. Within hours of being shared, it went viral across Albania. A young, glamorous couple stare at the camera, while sunbathing in front of a hotel. In the background there is a pair of skis leaning against the wall, just under the hotel arcades. The woman lying on a sun-lounger is draped in a long white fur coat, her hands buried deep in its pockets, a small handbag precariously balanced on her lap. Her large smile and vaguely distracted expression contrast with the much more serious, almost inquisitive, gaze of the man stretching on the parallel sun-bench next to her. It's hard to say if the frown on his forehead and the squint in his eyes are caused by the sun, or if it's an expression of discontent with the photographer, to whom he looks as though he's trying to communicate something. A packet of cigarettes sits on a nearby side table, and beneath it lies a paper shopping bag, fancy but not ostentatious. You can just about make out the label: “Hotel Vittoria”.

I did not need to read the caption on the post to recognise my grandparents, Leman and Asllan, in the photo. Judging by the winter attire, the name of the hotel and the skis in the background, it was taken during their honeymoon in Cortina d’Ampezzo, in the Italian Alps. The year was 1941. My grandmother spoke often and fondly about those ten days spent learning to ski in the Dolomites. “I felt the happiest person alive”, she would say, “and Cortina was the happiest place in the world”. Yes truly, she insisted, even though this was Italy, and it was the winter of 1941 and war raged all around Europe like never before.

Years later, when she was no longer there, or perhaps *because* of it, I became absorbed by the question of what it meant to feel the happiest person alive in the winter of 1941. Part of me wondered if the description she gave genuinely reflected her feelings at the time, and what this revealed about her character. I had trouble connecting her personal rendition of those weeks with my knowledge of historical events, both in Albania and elsewhere. Operation Barbarossa in the Soviet Union, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the ongoing battle in Yugoslavia, all this would have made headlines just as she practised skiing, relishing the crisp winter air. Was she indifferent to the most brutal battles of the most brutal war humanity had ever known? I had trouble squaring this with her personality, and with her views. She was no fascist apologist, of that I was certain. And she was far from indifferent. Perhaps she was simply trying to cope, as she had done throughout her life, sensing that something even worse was about to unfold, that the days of innocence were numbered. Yet, her elaborate account of their activities – snow in the morning, bridge in the afternoon, waltz in the evening – was sufficiently concentrated on facts rather than subjective impressions to make me feel genuinely uneasy about sentiments that seemed at odds not simply with her character but with the entire course of the world.

Looking back, after her death in 2006, I regretted having been unable to articulate clearly not so much the questions, but what I found disturbing about her reconstruction of that period in her life. The way she spoke about those days in Cortina clashed with my perception of her as a kind of moral saint - duty-bound, compassionate, always attentive to the needs of others before her own. It is not that I had expected her to forego her honeymoon - life continues, even in 1941, even in the middle of war, perhaps with greater intensity, the closer one feels to the end.

“I heard a Voice within the Tavern cry, Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup, Before Life’s Liquor in its Cup be dry”, was one of her favourite verses from Omar Khayyam’s Rubbaiyat. Her cup was still half-full in 1941- the real tragedy would unfold a few years later. She could have said it was a honeymoon after all – or war – and that in exceptional circumstances, perhaps all feelings take an exceptional form. Yet she seemed utterly indifferent to the events in the world, never felt the need to explain, never made excuses. Was it one of those tricks memory plays where the reconstruction of your mood depends not so much on the experience of the past but on new knowledge acquired much later?

At first, I had wished there would be at least an image of her in a wedding gown, a departing bride and groom, a scratchy old black-and-white film perhaps, a photo of my grandparents as a couple – anything I could rely on to compare the material in my mind with facts recorded at the time. In response, I was told that although there were several albums, only two individual photos of them had survived, one of her on a pair of skis and one of him, as if they had gone on separate trips to the same place. The rest of our family records disappeared, I was told, in 1946, after my grandfather was arrested by the communists for agitation, propaganda and collaboration with British intelligence officers, "when the police came and took everything". The categorical nature of that last statement, a statement that left no room for ambiguity, though initially disappointing, in the end proved comforting. It meant there was nobody alive to question, and nothing remaining to search.

Nothing, that is, until that photo from Cortina of them *as a couple*, which I had never seen before, appeared on a stranger's social media page. I did not immediately think it was bizarre or inappropriate to find it there: I was initially distracted by the disappointment caused by the contrast between how I had always imagined those Hotel Vittoria scenes and what the photograph I was seeing for the first time captured. It was not an image of happy people – certainly not of "the happiest people in the world". Leman was smiling, yes, and her posture seemed relaxed enough, but there was also something unnatural about it. She had that artificial expression people adopt when they know an important moment of their life is about to turn into an image that will outlast them, and they want the image to convey not just the feelings of the moment but also a certain second-order awareness of their importance. As for my grandfather, Asllan, he died only a few months after I was born, and I had seen so few images of him that it was impossible to interpret his expression or assign a character to it. It was hard to tell, for example, if his large frown and the squint in his eyes were his usual sceptical expression on camera or if something else troubled him, of which perhaps even my grandmother was not aware. Had the switch on the camera been pressed too early, giving him little time to prepare for how he would like to be remembered by posterity? Or was he distracted by other thoughts?

I had forgotten that I was looking at my grandparents' photo on a stranger's social media page until the user comments started to multiply with the same speed as the likes, shares, and hearts on the post.

"Is the Leman Ypi pictured here related to Lea Ypi, the philosophy professor? The old woman was a real lady, she hailed from one of Albania's most noble families. She carried herself with such dignity, and those communist monsters robbed her of it".

No, no, I start typing, my grandmother always insisted that the one thing she never lost, even as everything else slipped away, was… But I am distracted by the next comment that flashes onto the screen: "Albanians will never learn from history – Ypi lectures around the world about how capitalism is wrong because it turns everything into a commodity. Presumably that includes her own criticism, for which she's paid handsomely. Meanwhile, she conveniently forgets her own grandfather, who rotted for decades in a communist prison".

I pause feeling a tinge of guilt, before reading on to discover a new relative called Sami, who claims to be in regular correspondence with me. “I try to persuade Ypi about the moral flaws of her views”, Sami writes. “We are related via her grandmother Leman’s grandparents: Ibrahim Pasha, *beylerbey* of Rumelia, and his wife Mediha Hanim, who lived between Istanbul and Salonica”. This revelation prompts another user to chime in: “It is evident from this photo that we’re looking at a pro-Enlightenment, secular, European elite. God in the Kur’an informs us that one of the causes of the punishment of past peoples was the moral decay of their elites - much like the state of our own elites before the Second World War. That punishment continues to this day because our elites remain morally bankrupt”.

Other remarks appear accompanied by a warning from social media regulators. “This post may include sensitive content. Are you sure you want to see it?”. I take a deep breath and click.

“You dishonoured not just your grandmother but all the victims of communism, you communist bitch”.

Then another comment follows: “The grandmother too was a bitch”.

And a third: “Perhaps not a bitch, but a communist spy. And before that, a fascist collaborator”.

I stop reading and close the page. Yet, in the following days something compels me to return to it. I don’t mind the insults to me – objectionable views become even more so if those who hold them feel censored, I’ve always told myself. But with my grandmother, it’s different. If she could somehow witness these exchanges, she would be deeply hurt no matter how they were interpreted: if I had indeed turned out to dishonour her, and they were right, then because they were right. And if they were wrong, then because they were wrong, and she would want to call out their lies. I wished I could release her from the burden of words she can’t control, thoughts she has no capacity to frame, ideas she has no means to develop. Why should those people decide - without knowing her, without knowing us - what my grandmother wanted, who she was, what that photo meant? And who gave them the right to share it, to summarise her life, and then heap scorn on it?

There is something about the human spirit, my grandmother would say, that endures all attempts at offence, injury, or humiliation – something animals are incapable of, because they are incapable of thoughts disconnected from their immediate existence. We call it dignity. Back then, she could still speak for herself. In death, she is powerless, unable to shape or vindicate her legacy. And yet, a version of her somehow continues to exist alongside those words, like the photo on a desecrated grave continues to exist alongside the pile of bones scattered in the mud. Does dignity require someone’s continuous existence–an active capacity to defend that dignity, protect it from assault, stand up in its name? Is it a relationship dependent on the recognition of others, on the fulfillment of our commitments - a way of being in the world, both individually and collectively? Or is it an inherent quality we possess just because of who we are - disciplined by a will that is free, yet still susceptible to err? And if the preservation of dignity requires one to be alive, does this mean that dignity is not so immaterial after all, that a dead person cannot have dignity, that dignity is the kind of property that turns to dust just like someone's hair, nails, or flesh?

I can read those comments and choose to respond to them or ignore, engage with the content or report it instead. I can block the users, or look away, I can even campaign for stricter regulation. I have the freedom to resist when I suspect misinformation. She, however, is condemned to silence. A caricature of her is emerging here, stripped of context, memory, evidence, or even the basic sympathy we extend to strangers when we encounter them in person. I feel compelled to rectify, to share the stories she entrusted to me, to tell the truth of her life. But do I even know the truth? Can I recount her life the way she would have done it? Can I transform this caricature into a once real human character?

It's difficult to say how. That photograph is new - the context unsettling. My thoughts, my effort to defend her dignity are like light reflected on a broken mirror - fragments of a world hanging in uncertainty. She carried her past as a tortoise carries its shell - impossible to view it from the inside. Of course, my understanding of that chapter in her life was always veiled in doubt. But now my speculations, the scenes I conjured, the conversations I stitched together - everything I knew, everything we shared - blend with the alternative reality of a stranger's social media wall. Why did she insist that the days in Cortina were the happiest she'd ever experienced? The more I dwell on it, the more extreme her stance becomes. Yet, it would be awkward to explain or apologise on her behalf, to ascribe to her a fault she may or may not have recognised. How can I claim authority over a life already lived, no matter how closely entwined with my own? How can I be the author of a story that has already reached *The End*?

Then a final, unsettling thought strikes me. What if those anonymous users commenting on the photo are uncovering something that has been hidden from me? Perhaps I've never known the real reason behind her persecution. The insinuation that my grandmother might have been a collaborator - a communist or a fascist, or, most disturbingly, both - lingers like a shadow. I may be wrong to think of her as a model of virtue. Could these strangers, despite their crudeness, know her better than I do? Perhaps only they can give voice to the silence that deafens me. Perhaps authority lies with the proverbial wisdom of the crowd.

I can think of only one way forward. Find the original. Return to the source.

"I can't remember where I found it… I think on the floor, perhaps in a box… I honestly can't remember" was Çim's evasive answer after I managed to get in touch and ask where he had found my grandmother's photo.

"It's all in the Files Authority. I was there for my own research".

"Why did you share my family photo online?"

"The connection is bad, I can't hear you — it's all in that office, must go now".

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"If I leave you here, will you be OK?" the taxi driver asks, once we are parked in front of the soldiers guarding the entrance to the military complex. They point to the sign indicating it is prohibited to stand where we are.

“Wait”, I say. “Let me check with them”. I turn to the soldiers, noticing their guns pointing downwards, and think they must be fake.

“Is this the entrance to the Authority for Information concerning Documentation of the Former State Security Service?”, I shout from the open window of the taxi.

“You’re not from here, right?”, one of them laughs, and I worry that if he laughs too much something will happen to the gun over his shoulders. What if it’s not fake?

“Not from here, no”, I say.

“What is the purpose of your visit today?”, he asks.

“Just having fun in the archive”, I say. When facing a man with the gun, one must keep things friendly.

He suddenly turns serious.

“I apologise. It’s about my grandmother and my grandfather, well, their files. They should contain material that will help me find out more about her life. She was born in 1918, her grandfather was an Ottoman administrator in Istanbul, but she lived in Salonica, then moved to Albania, and there should be photos of her youth here, taken in Italy in 1941, which may help me connect the dots of her life, which we’ve never seen before, and which…”.

“Ok, ok”, he interrupts, “I don’t need to know all that. Do you have an appointment?”

I show him my email. He lifts the barrier on the entrance, and I feel as though I have just been let through the gates of history.

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“Your documents are in JPG format”, an employee who has introduced herself as Vera points at a black laptop that has been ceremonially placed on a desk in the centre of the room. The laptop seems old. I wonder if it was a present from the Swedes. I’m told this is where “researchers” come, though I can’t see any other researchers, only three other employees sipping coffee at their tables, placed around mine in a semi-circle. One of them offers to make me coffee. I decline, and seem to upset her, but then Vera points out that I am the Marxist author of a book about freedom, which makes her smile and gesture as if this explains everything.

“If you need the files printed or if you want to take pdf documents with you, here is a list with the fees”.

I nod, distracted by the question I have been mulling over in my head, unsure whether it is appropriate to raise.

I finally muster the courage to ask it. “Are there no physical files?”

The employee who offered to make me coffee gives a bewildered look, as if she is trying to decide whether to categorise my intervention as a provocation or let it go.

“Do you know that we lived in fear of being physically attacked the first months this place opened?” Vera’s question is clearly rhetorical. Rummaging in a metal drawer located under her desk, she pulls out a pastel green leaflet. It’s entitled “Law

No. 45/2015 On the Right to Information concerning Documents of the Former State Security of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania".

"It's all explained here. Dos and don'ts. It took twenty-five years to come up with a framework for how to access the files. Twenty-five years. Still, the spies are not all dead. It's all the same peo…".

She interrupts herself, purses her lips, raises one eyebrow and directs her index finger to the chair next to "the researcher's" desk.

"Be careful when you sit on that chair", she says, "it wobbles. Also, the computer is slow, don't keep pressing buttons, give it some time."

Waiting for my files to open, I flick through the green leaflet that explains the legal framework for accessing the documentation collected on my behalf. On page 3 of the document, article 4 lays down the principles. "*The collection, administration, processing, use, and dissemination of information regarding the documents of the former State Security are guided by principles of: legality, protection of the public interest, protection of national security, reconciliation and national unity, public access to official information, protection of the right to privacy and personal data, protection of classified information, transparency, cooperation between state institutions, efficiency and effectiveness*".

"No mention of truth…" I muse with Vera who does not seem to hear me. "Not even truths…".

I pronounce "truths" raising my voice slightly, and with a somewhat elongated "U", hoping that the plural– truths – will command the respect that the singular fails to obtain.

“Truuuuths?”, she repeats, wrinkling her nose, as if she’s been unexpectedly confronted with a heap of organic waste.

“Well, yes, it says here ‘reconciliation and national unity’, but based on what? Doesn’t one need truth for reconciliation? Also, there’s not a single mention of the word ‘victim’”.

“Maybe check the part on definitions”, she says.

I flick through the leaflet again and read aloud.

“*Article 2. Definitions. For present purposes, the definition of “archive” is the same as that prescribed by the legislation in force as applicable to all other archives*”.

“There you go”, she says.

I must look perplexed.

“Did you apply to see the files as a researcher or a family member?”

The question of what category I belong to has tormented me for weeks. I have read enough stories and seen enough films about people who have gone to the archives to find the truth about their relatives only to discover their family were also collaborators. When it became clear that The Office might contain not only the photos that I thought destroyed but everything else too — formal requests, complaints, police investigations, trial reports, everything that explained what happened, why my family was targeted, who else was involved, and perhaps also what, if anything, could have been done to prevent it all, the fear of the archive, that great unknown, ended up prevailing over the loyalty I felt to my family. What would I do if my grandmother wasn't as innocent as I had always believed?

"They did think about victims", Vera explains, almost resentful at my long silence. "If you applied as a family member, there are no fees, it's all free".

Free from what? If it turns out my grandmother became complicit in a surveillance system that ruined the lives of hundreds of thousands, the relief from saving on the full fee is irrelevant compared to the burden I will have to bear as her descendant. With special relations come special responsibilities. Perhaps I care too much about truth: a truth I imagine fragile, painful, incomplete, accessible only with a huge interpretive effort. I prefer to think of myself as an impartial spectator, an archaeologist in the temple of mutilated knowledge, a shaman leaning over a rotten body. I want to tread carefully in the archive. I want to approach those files philosophically, even aesthetically, in a mode intentionally different from that of the "legislation in force". I hate the rules we submit to simply because we have no other choice - I prefer the use of judgement, the free play between feeling and reason, the slow emergence from the inherited bonds of family, nation, unreflexive belonging. I'm taking myself too seriously, you might say. Still, to see clearly, we must be able to imagine.

"I applied as a researcher".

***

The computer desktop is deep blue with no icons on the dock other than the files containing the information I have requested. I click on the mouse to open the first document and wait for what feels like an eternity but since nothing happens, I move on to the second, then the third. I tap on the keyboard, harder and harder, like a toddler discovering a piano, surprised to find out they have some control over it but disappointed it does not produce the sounds they expected. Eventually I give up pretending everything is going according to plan and look helplessly towards Vera who is studying the bottom of her coffee cup. I wait a few moments, then start pressing CTRL+ALT+DEL to restart the programme.

“Avash, avash”, Vera says when she notices, making a sign which I interpret as an order to vacate the chair.

“Which file do you want first?”, she asks, once the screen has been restarted.

I shrug.

“Whichever you manage to open”.

She nods, visibly satisfied. She continues to click competently until a yellow page appears. At the centre of it, I recognise my grandmother’s name, handwritten in black pencil. I am slightly distracted by the sound that the wooden chair makes as it starts to wobble, and a few seconds later I notice that it is my body that triggers the motion of the chair. It’s shaking, as if it was standing naked in the middle of a frozen pit, and I seem unable to control it just as I seem unable to concentrate on the meaning of the sentences that appear one after another, as I continue to click on the mouse, scrolling up and down the files.

Top left of the page: “Interior Ministry, directorate of State Security and the People’s Police, Section of Internal Affairs”. Top right, and almost faded, “EXTREMELY SECRET”.

Further down, a more recent annotation: “Fully declassified with decision nr. 15 taken on 30.05.2022 by the Authority for Information on the Documents of the Former State Security”. Several unintelligible words scribbled by hand, in grey pencil. “Archive nr. 531”, circled in red. Two lines with generalities: Name / Surname: Leman Ypi. Further down: “Pseudonym”.

That line is empty, and though I can’t be entirely certain of its meaning, for a split second my body stops shaking and I can hear myself breathing a sigh of relief.

I notice a drawing in the middle, a doodle, the shape of a perfect rhomboid filled with small circles, drawn around something that reads like “sect” followed by a roman number that looks like VII. Someone must have been bored at work. Who knows if they too were sipping coffee. Then my attention is caught by a single word that appears in the middle of the page and has been underlined three times: “*Greek*”. It makes no sense, and I continue to scroll, until the same word appears again in the next page, where other generalities are recorded.

Citizenship: *Greek*.

Name and Surname (again):

Leman Ypi.

Place of Birth: *Salonica*.

Ethnicity: *Albanian*.

Profession: *Employee of the Education Ministry*.

Religion: *Muslim*.

Registered: *29.12.1952*.

Name of referent who performed the registration: *Mayor H. Q.*

Reason for registration: *Suspected as foreign agent*.

“Foreign agent!”, I can’t help exclaiming.

Vera rolls backwards with her chair from her desk to mine.

“Do you need help again?”, she asks, this time in a voice whose sincerity takes me aback.

“Foreign agent….”, I repeat. “This is so strange. I am completely confused now”.

“Better a foreign agent than a Sigurimi one”, she says, as if to lighten my burden. “Though some of these foreign agents were later also recruited by the Sigurimi”.

I think back to the radiant smile on my grandmother’s face as she stretches on a sunlounge in Cortina d’Ampezzo in the winter of 1941. She doesn’t look like a prospective Sigurimi agent in that photo. Nor does she look like a foreign one. Then perhaps that’s the point of foreign agents, they’re not supposed to look the part. Still, why *Greek*?

I keep shaking my head. “My grandmother was just born in Greece”, I say, staring intently at Vera as if expecting her to confirm, “the Ottoman empire was still around …I don’t think she ever did anything political there. She moved to Albania when she was eighteen”.

“She was born in Turkey?”, Vera mistakenly repeats, “in the Ottoman Empire?”

“No, no, only her grandparents lived in Istanbul”, I say, “she herself was born in Greece - it was independent by then. I know it because of what she told me about how she was born”.

I smile, reminiscing about one of my favourite childhood stories - always shared on New Year's Eve as we prepared to start the celebrations. Lunch was exceptionally suspended to save food and appetite for the evening feast, and after a long day of grilling, frying and baking, delicious dishes were assembled on the table like trophies waiting to be claimed only by the most deserving. As I impatiently darted in and out of the kitchen pretending to lend a hand with the preparations, the aroma of the baklava squares became too tempting to resist. "That must be the ghost of the Pasha past!", my grandmother would chuckle whenever she caught me mid-gobble. And to distract her from the stash I had stored in my pocket, I would ask her to tell me the story I eventually learnt by heart: the tale of her grandfather, the esteemed Ibrahim Pasha, who, just days after my grandmother was born in Salonica, met his demise in Istanbul from overindulging in baklava. Can you believe it, she would exclaim, eyes wide with astonishment, Ibrahim Pasha, a man so brave he even quelled an Armenian revolt, and so clever he once secretly secured a business deal aboard a Danube steamer flying a British flag, died from eating too much of this same sweet! Ibrahim Pasha, a lion and a fox, defeated in the kitchen! It was such a ridiculous death that his wife Mediha Hanim was too embarrassed to announce it to the world. "Beware of baklava!", my grandmother warned, "baklava is treacherous, baklava will dishonour you, and poor Ibrahim Pasha was not even trying to eat it in secret like you. It had all been prepared to celebrate my birth!".

"I loved her stories about that time", I laugh with Vera, "some funny, some tragic, some a bit of both. I don't think I'll find any of that in all these numbered documents you've just given me".

"You never know", she replies, her eyes fixed on a large silver-framed clock that hangs on the wall.

We are both silent. I wonder whether I should find her remark reassuring. What if everything I know about my grandmother turns out to be a tale from the thousand and one nights: a story woven from hope and betrayal, power and intrigue, attachment and loss, a story conjured by her, like Schehrezade, simply to survive? Is the young woman whose photograph I hope to find in these files the same person I have known and loved? And what of the baby who was born in Salonica, and the young girl who learned everything from her young aunt? All of a sudden, I feel paralysed, threatened not just by the facts I might uncover but by the implications they carry for me. I always assumed our lives to be continuous, my present to be determined by her past. Now I'm no longer sure. I wonder if those worlds she straddled can ever be fully reconciled. How will I piece together the stories she passed down to me, and those I'm about to encounter for the first time?

"Albania…Sigurimi… Greek spy…Salonica…Istanbul… Ottoman Empire", Vera muses, tracing circles with her index finger on the researcher's desk, like a child connecting scattered dots to form a picture.

"Everything goes back to the Ottoman Empire, doesn't it? Sometimes I wonder, is it even dead?"

1

The Sick Man of Europe

“Not the stomach… it cannot be. It cannot be his stomach…”, Mediha Hanim, my great-grandmother, screamed in exasperation one afternoon in August 1918, wiping the tears off her cheeks.

“Doctor Elias, please close his eyes, *je vous en prie*. I cannot bear to see him like that. He looks so angry.”

The doctor made a compliant gesture with his head, took a few steps towards the corpse, and rearranged the fez.

“*Pourtant ma chère* Mediha Hanim”, he insisted, “that’s what it is. There is no other cause.”

“But he had not eaten for weeks. I kept begging him to eat. You heard me say it…”, she turned to one of the servants, shaking her head.

“Even the Grand Vizier had noticed when they met, about ten days ago”, she tried to explain between sobs. “My dear Ibrahim Pasha, he said, you look like one of those hungry Albanian boys we used to recruit as janissaries! You need to look after yourself. We can’t help the sick man of Europe if we make ourselves sick…”

The doctor tried to suppress a bitter smile. It used to be only the Russians, he mused to himself. Now even the Porte is calling itself that. And yet, they go on talking as if there was a cure. They need to be humiliated before they accept defeat.

“He still looks angry, even with his eyes closed”, Mediha Hanim’s thin, weary voice broke into his thoughts. “He would have hated to hear you say that. Besides, he had not eaten for weeks…”.

The doctor took a deep breath, leaned again on Ibrahim Pasha and covered him.

“*Mais voilà, c’est bien ça Madame*. Nothing for days and then five whole slices of baklava. How is the stomach supposed to cope…”

“Please don’t mention that horrible word again, I beg you. Of course, I told him to be careful, but Ibrahim Pasha… you know what my husband is… was… like”. Mediha Hanim suddenly interrupted herself and looked around.

“What is this smell?”

“Dafne, Dafne… here…”. The doctor made a sign to the servant to fetch clean water.

“*Oh non,* not that, not that…”, the woman covered her nose with a silk handkerchief, then opened it as if she were about to stretch it to her whole face.

“*Mon cher* Ibrahim Pasha, he would have been so embarrassed… *Eau de cologne*, Dafne, bring the *eau de cologne*”, she ordered the servant running about in the other room.

She then turned to open the window for some fresh air but when the majestic cupola of Istanbul’s Teşvikiye Cami appeared to her like a giant repulsive belly, she burst into tears once more.

“This is not how he would have wanted to leave”, she said, visibly shaken, making her way outside the pasha’s bedroom, with Doctor Elias following her. “He would have wanted to leave with dignity”.

Mediha Hanim spoke with great sincerity. She had known Ibrahim Pasha from the age in which memories begin to form, when they used to play hide-and-seek in the corridors of their shared family home in Leskovik, then part of the Ottoman Empire’s vilayet of Yanina, on the border between modern-day Albania and Greece. The two were cousins. She was taller than him, skinny, with dark curly hair, and lively eyes like that of Circassian women, famed for their beauty. As a child, she had followed him around, mocking the slight limp with which he walked – the result of a congenital birth defect that many people later wrongly ascribed to an accident in battle, a view he did nothing to correct. And she had called him *mon cher mari* anticipating, already then, that one day they would be married, that they would visit Paris for their honeymoon, and that they would have a boy and a girl, all forecasts whose accuracy had later surprised even her, especially after the Pasha chose another wife. Mediha Hanim was upset, clearly, yet she never wished for the other woman to lose her life in childbirth, as happened almost exactly nine months after the wedding. It was only at that point that Ibrahim Pasha became a part of her life in the same way the priced porcelain collection bought second-hand during their honeymoon in Paris became part of her favourite soirees: valued for the attention it helped her receive, admired for its independent qualities, but most of all cherished as a reflection of the care she had put into ensuring it would not break during the transport.

Yet Mediha Hanim could not be said to have known her *cher mari*. She knew facts about him: that he enjoyed stuffed aubergines without tomatoes and that the afternoon coffee, unlike the morning one, should be served sweet. She knew how to draw his curtains in the morning so as to wake him up without being cursed, when to offer the stick for his evening walk, when not to mention his migraines, and how to share news from the properties in Salonica where their son, Avni Bey, now lived — the death of a peasant or the birth of a child — in just the kind of tone the pasha appreciated: neither alarming nor enthusing. But it would be difficult to call this knowledge, if by knowledge one understands not simply the kind of familiarity that leads to smooth interactions on a day-to-day basis, but a deeper understanding of someone's motives and purposes, the sort of thing necessary to pronounce judgments on their dignity.

Whether the Pasha himself would have welcomed the use of that term is unclear. He might have considered it one of those foreign-sounding concepts that he tended to view with suspicion, the kind of word that popped up here and there in complex sentences about who did and didn't have it and how to find it in the world, which in turn called for a theory to explain what was meant, without ever being able to settle the matter.

Contrary to most high-ranking officials who worked for the Porte, and deployed words like that increasingly carelessly and out of context, Ibrahim Pasha had lived his entire life acutely aware of the dangers they posed. Freedom, equality, brotherhood — all innocent-sounding, but they tended to proliferate and cause trouble each time they appeared, the more inconsiderately one invoked them. Especially after all the attempts at so-called “modernisation” in the Empire, after the Gülhane Edict which apparently inaugurated a new “social contract” between the Sultan and his subjects, the tendency had got completely out of hand.

“Social contract”, there was another term one hardly knew what it was supposed to mean. The dignity of subjects, the dignity of authority, the dignity conferred by God… Ibrahim Pasha especially resented the confusion they caused in lower ranking officials — simple men who would have otherwise been perfectly comfortable with the demands of their roles, were it not for this new habit of having to explain all their duties with reference to such words. But the Pasha had long given up trying to convince his peers. He spoke little anyway, and in the last few years of his life, he spoke mainly to impart orders. It was precisely one of those orders — the order to procure him baklava for dinner – that had resulted in his death from, as the doctor put it , “refeeding”.

“Doctor, I forbid you to say this - I do not want to hear it!”, Mediha Hanim raised her right index finger in a threatening, almost military gesture.

For the last several days she had been sitting by her husband’s bedside, slowly watching the colour disappear from his face like the paintings on the porcelain collection had faded over the years. When the doctor confirmed the sick man’s death, she entered that stage of grief where guilt replaces disbelief, but since she was not the kind of woman who could or would shoulder feelings of guilt on her own, she had found a way to shift the focus from the event itself to the matter of how it should be recorded. Powerless before the course of events, she wanted to at least shape, if not manipulate, the impression it left on others. This is why she felt she had a duty to vigorously reject the doctor's explanation of both facts and value— what had happened, yes, the pasha's death, but also how one should have expected it to happen.

"*Hanim effendi*", Doctor Elias objected. "It matters how one lives. Death… well, what can one say… in death we're all the same, it is better that way. The pasha led an honourable life. He was a hero in times of war and a saint in times of peace. He knew how to command men and how to obey Allah."

There was a hint of tiredness in his voice, that might explain why the last part of his sentence sounded less convincing than usual. Elias Levy had arrived from Salonica by rail earlier that morning, having received news that the pasha was gravely ill, had at first refused medical assistance, and finally consented to being seen by Doctor Elias, and Doctor Elias only. The two men had met several years earlier during the pasha's exile in Salonica. Elias was then still a young graduate from the university of Vienna who had impressed Ibrahim Pasha, not so much with the mastery of his field (the pasha was convinced that with greater hygiene, electricity, running water, and all the other luxuries scientific progress offered even a boza street vendor could become a good doctor if he committed to it) but with something else, that modern medicine was unable to offer: optimism. From a very young age, Doctor Elias was convinced that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds and while he had initially found it difficult to reconcile his innate optimism with the demands of his profession, he had found in Ibrahim Pasha one of the very few patients able to not only tolerate this stance but actively cherish it.

Mediha Hanim shook her head.

“Doctor Elias, how can you say it does not matter how we leave this world”, she reproached, vaguely irritated. “*Vous l’avez bien dit vous même* only a few months ago. Remember, you were speaking to Ibrahim Pasha about Sultan Abdul Hamid’s isolation. He may not have been able to halt the decline of the body politic, you said, but at least he presided with dignity over the decline of his own body. He studied, he produced beautiful pieces of woodwork, he wrote poems…”

“The poems were mediocre – even the Sultan himself knew it”, the doctor could not help interrupting. “In any case”, he continued, noticing the woman frown, “this way of thinking about the body, I am sorry to say but it is all wrong. Everything matters. The brain, the heart, the stomach. The human being, you see, is an organism, in organisms everything is connected. If one part struggles, all the rest suffer. It’s a mistake to think there is any sort of ranking between core and peripheral functions”.

Just like the provinces of the Empire, he thought to himself. They keep ranking what’s strategically important and what they can afford to let go, but they will lose everything. It’s only a matter of time.

“I can assure you”, he turned to the woman, “that is how fatal mistakes were made in the past, by neglecting ailments that were considered marginal. Then it was too late…”

Mediha Hanim looked at him perplexed.

“Neglect?”, she said with a note of pride. “Ibrahim Pasha was not a man to neglect things. He stopped eating not out of indifference but in protest. He had warned the Porte repeatedly, he kept saying the Albanians could not be trusted, they were no allies, he had said it long before they went off and declared independence from the Empire. They're like those children who suddenly turn against you… a bit like our daughter Shefikat… she is so rebellious…"

She was rambling.

"Of course, you still love them, they're your children, but when they do that to you…you don't know how to respond. Poor Shefikat, who loved her father so much… she will be back from school soon, she has looked after him day and night, next to me… oh poor, poor Ibrahim Pasha…"

She began to reconstruct the events from the start, as if death could be reverted by telling the story of how it happened.

"The Vizier thought Ibrahim Pasha had his own interests to protect, all because of those meetings with the Young Turks in Salonica but I can assure you, it was the opposite. That's when the migraines started, after those meetings in that committee for so-called Union and Progress. Anyway, after every meeting he had a migraine. That upset him, I cannot tell you how much, to think that the Porte did not trust him. He had always worried they treated him with suspicion because we spoke Albanian at home, *mais vous le savez bien vous même*, we only did it every now and then, we weren't trying to prove anything, it was a habit. But they read something into it, he thought, and the day he went to see him, the Vizier interrupted him and asked if Ibrahim Pasha had ever been to *Al-ba-nia*…".

"He did?", the doctor exclaimed surprised.

Mediha Hanim shook her head vigorously.

“*Mais oui, c’est incroyable, n’est-ce pas?*”, she continued, “Ibrahim Pasha thought this was deliberate, clear proof that they did not trust him. It was an obvious provocation, why would he want to go to Albania? Sure, he’d sent money to build a tekke in that village that was burnt down by the Greeks, but so what? He had done it before, he couldn’t even remember what the village was called. It was just a habit! In any case, first the committee then the tekke and that’s when they started ostracising him: it was clear he was no longer trusted. He would hear them whisper behind him. When the vizier asked if he had been to Albania, he could no longer take it, he stopped eating altogether. He was caught between the Young Turks and the Albanians, who were getting ahead of themselves with all those requests, and when even the Albanians decided to go off and create their own state and asked him to find diplomatic support, he felt betrayed. Everyone has abandoned me, he said. He could no longer taste the food, in the last few years he had almost given up eating. But then the telegram came…”.

“Do you know Livy’s old fable of the stomach?”, the doctor interrupted her.

“Levy?”, Mediha Hanim raised her eyebrows.

“Not my family, no, Livy… never mind”, Doctor Elias continued. “The different parts of the body once rebelled because the stomach was receiving all the food and they got nothing, so together they decided to stop working for it. The mouth refused to swallow, the teeth refused to chew and so on, all hoping for the stomach to be starved. Except that when the stomach began to perish, the same thing happened to all the others: the heart, the brain, the hands and feet. And when the other organs noticed they were declining, they appreciated the stomach better, and started to cooperate. The same thing happened to Ibrahim Pasha.” And, to the Porte, he again thought to himself.

“Doctor Elias, that is no way to speak about Ibrahim Pasha! I have nothing against Levy or whoever, and even against the cooperation of the organisms, but…”

She started to sneeze and after the doctor offered a handkerchief, she wiped her face and tried to recompose herself. She made a sign to Dafne, their young servant, to leave the room. “We must make provisions now”, she said. “All those announcements, it is so difficult, so difficult for me. I wonder if we could-”, Mediha Hanim paused with a sudden flash in her eyes, and lowered her voice. “If we could… work on this?”

The doctor was perplexed.

“Work?”, he repeated.

Her face had acquired a decisive expression. “Yes, work on the announcement, convey… something else?”

“Something else?”

“When we communicate *la cause officielle*, the official cause of death. Perhaps we can keep *that* as our own little secret”. Something between a smile and a grimace had now formed on her face as she grappled for words. “And…and… perhaps, as a last service to Ibrahim Pasha, declare the official reason in keeping with his rank, I am certain he would have appreciated”.

She had become convinced that the glory of her husband's life and death had to be connected, that it was crucial for Ibrahim Pasha to be remembered as the dignitary he was.

"The stomach…" – this time she pronounced the word fully – "after all, the stomach", she repeated out loud "was not the reason it all happened. It was that telegram from Salonica."

The doctor nodded.

"It's true, I have rarely seen Ibrahim Pasha so delighted", he emphasised. "He wrote to me, *mon cher* Elias, one does not often receive good news, and I had been longing for a grandson. I had almost given up hoping. Did you know they were asked to give the baby my name? *Bien sur*, they accepted."

"Poor Ibrahim Pasha", Mediha Hanim sighed. "He will never be able to see the little one now. But how could we have known, what this baby would bring upon us, this is such a tragedy… please Doctor Elias, I beg you, let us forget what you mentioned, let us say, it was love, yes, let's call it love…"

The doctor frowned.

"Or perhaps love is too vague, too emotional. The Pasha disliked outbursts of emotion; he thought there was something needy about those who display them. Is there something else, both concrete and dignified? A credible explanation of what happened, not an embarrassing one like this one".

The doctor thought for a moment, then whispered something in her ear.

"Yes", Mediha Hanim replied firmly. "Thank you, Doctor Elias, *merci*. *Mon cher* Ibrahim Pasha may now rest in peace.

A heart attack sounds excellent”.

2

The Unmixing of Peoples

“My name is Leman, but you can also call me Ibrahim Bey”.

The little girl put the emphasis on “bey” with a mischievous expression when the stranger knocking on the door asked who she was.

The man, a middle-aged street vendor with a small head barely visible under an enormous turban, a thin moustache that protruded over the edges of his face, and a slim body that looked on the verge of disintegrating under the weight of multiple sacks, gave her a perplexed smile.

“Are you a girl or a boy?”

She lowered her eyes, spotted the multiple stains on the new sailor suit she was wearing for the first time that morning, and remembered her mother’s warning to keep the outfit clean. She was not only covered in dirt but also drenched in sweat, after a day of running around in the scorching August heat, somewhat overexcited by the present she had received from her aunt, Shefikat, that morning: a new canary to add to the collection of ninety-nine birds that occupied an entire room on the upper floor of the family villa. When she noticed that the eyes of the stranger were on her, she tried to adjust her appearance. She corrected her posture, wiped her forehead, tried in vain to rub the stains off her shorts, and rearranged the silky butterfly-shaped clip that disciplined the fringe on her short, dark hair.

“I’m a girl”, she replied slightly guiltily. “But I was a boy before I crossed the rainbow. In Albanian stories, boys who cross the rainbow become girls, and viceversa”.

“I see”, the man replied. “Mashallah.”

He too had been racing all day and was still panting when he stopped in front of the large oak panel marking the entrance to the villa. The sacks made a clanking sound as he lay them on the ground — he had forgotten the delivery was fragile. From the first floor he could hear loud voices arguing, interspersed with the chaotic chirping of birds.

“They said fifteen more, their last offer”, a male voice that sounded vaguely familiar claimed, before being abruptly interrupted by a second one: “Fifteen? Fifteen is a scandal, they should take at least twenty-five, or better thirty – the deadline is approaching, how will they manage otherwise?”

“No, no, no, fifteen, fifteen and no more, they made it very clear – and no luggage either”, the first man objected.

“*Mais oui sans valises*, *ça va sans dire,* otherwise everyone would go down, and anyway, they will receive all they need once they arrive”, an elderly voice tried to reassure them, and the man recognised the voice of Mediha Hanim, who he had come to see. The exchange had the familiarity of increasingly animated bargains with customers in the bazaar, but the knowledge that those numbers referred to something else, of an entirely different nature from the price of goods on sale, made a shiver go down his spine. Soon, very soon, he thought. Soon it would be his turn.

Indifferent to the noise coming from upstairs, the girl continued to stare at the sacks with an expectant face that mixed confidence and curiosity. The man waited a little longer, hoping a servant might soon come out to relieve him of his delivery. When nobody appeared, he decided to address the child.

“Could you tell Mediha Hanim that Selim is here with the leeches. She’s not expecting me, but she’ll be pleased”.

It’s my last delivery…”, he then whispered sadly, opening one sack and pulling out five large ceramic jars which he carefully placed on the ground.

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Following the death of Ibrahim pasha, Mediha Hanim had developed a mysterious concern for stomach ailments. Although the glorious days of leech farming in the Levant were long past, together with the wealth it had brought to the city, she remained convinced of their miraculous properties to cure gastric diseases. She resisted her son Avni Bey’s remarks that “in Paris, leeches for medical purposes are no longer in fashion” with an energy and conviction that surprised everyone. Each time the stomach “teased her”, as Mediha Hanim put it, she would lock herself in her bedroom, apply four or five leeches to her belly, and observe them crawl around and suck her blood until large red spots formed, at which point she could finally remove the creatures from her body, place them back in water, and rise vigorously from her bed exclaiming: “*Voila*!”

Elias, the family doctor, who had taught her the procedure, did not openly endorse the therapy, but since he was also the only one aware of the true motives behind her sudden sensitivity to the stomach, his criticism was less forthright. He knew that the only answer one could give to the question of how to cure a non-existent disease was to let the patient decide freely. His only crucial intervention came when the Ottoman authorities banned the use of leeches for medical purposes and he introduced her to Selim as one of the few honest black-market traders left in town.

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“I don’t have much time, this is my last delivery”, Selim repeated, seeing that the girl was staring at his jars in silence without rushing inside to inform Mediha Hanim. “We’re leaving tomorrow morning”. He pronounced the last two sentences in a hush, ending with something like a question mark, as if he were trying to remind himself of a message passed by someone, a truth whose meaning he had difficulty grasping.

The girl suddenly looked sad. The vendor’s message had not been what she expected, and when it became clear that the delivery was not intended for her, she had to try and conceal her disappointment.

“It’s my birthday today!”, she declared solemnly and with a hint of reproach that a servant had not only turned up unprepared for the important event but seemed to ignore it altogether, preoccupied only by his imminent departure who knows where. “Everyone is upstairs”, she continued, “We’re supposed to celebrate but we started late, because *papà* and some other men had to give a deposition to the committee, sorry the *subcommittee*, and they came back angry, all day long they have been arguing, that’s what the noise is all about”.

She was proud to have remembered the word *subcommittee* and since she had no idea what it meant, she was even prouder to have pronounced it correctly. “I’ve just turned six”, she said, as if to explain where all the knowledge and wisdom came from. “*Tante* Shefikat gave me a canary for my birthday. She’s teaching me to read”.

“Mashallah”, the man repeated in a tone intended to give her the attention she craved but that remained just as detached as the rest. “Happy birthday to Ibrahim Bey then!”

She smiled again, then immediately turned serious, as if having second thoughts. Was it a good thing that it always made her laugh, she thought. That name, and that grandfather she’d never met, and about whom the first thing she learned was that her coming into the world had coincided with his departure from it, or even more awkwardly, that her arrival had been the *cause* of his departure, as if there wasn’t enough space for both in the world. Every year on her birthday, her father, Avni Bey, declared to the rest of the family gathered to celebrate that she would go on to achieve great things since already as a new-born she had succeeded where the fiercest Greek brigands had failed: causing the death of the mighty Ibrahim Pasha.

On that 6th August 1924, however, she had started to have doubts. Surely it wasn’t *her* doing, she told herself. Surely it was Ibrahim Bey, her imaginary other, the boy version, the grandchild that had only ever existed as the result of a telegraphic error, the male heir whose birth had been mistakenly announced shortly before the pasha’s death. If it had been her, Leman Leskoviku, born in Salonica on 6th August 1918, the Pasha might not have been as enthusiastic, and his heart would perhaps not have beaten so fast as to stop working altogether. His life would have been spared. But was even that a good thing?

“Papa was lucky to leave us when he did”, she heard her father say just as Mediha Hanim was entering the veranda, followed by an army of servants to whom she gave instructions on where to place the jars by waving her arms firmly in the air. “He wouldn’t have been able to take any of this”.

After the death of the pasha and their daughter Shefikat’s graduation from the American College of Women, Mediha Hanim and her daughter had left Constantinople to join her son’s family in Salonica, occupying the third floor of a large house overlooking the sea, in the Kalamaria neighbourhood. The house, alongside several acres of land in the nearby seaside town of Volos, had been bought by a middle-aged Ibrahim Pasha several decades before, after he had been instructed by Sultan Abdul Hamid to go into exile in Salonica. An initially minor disagreement with the Porte about tax collection in a remote Circassian village had unexpectedly escalated into a major one about political reform in Armenia, and overnight the pasha had gone from being one of the Sultan’s most trusted advisors to a prime suspect of plotting against the government.

They had spent a few months renting a luxurious villa belonging to a wealthy Jewish merchant’s family, furnished in the new *alla franca* style. Mediha Hanim loved it so much as to exclaim “*Salonique la magnifique*!” each time she entered the new house at the end of her evening walks by the seaside. As a matter of fact she had found their temporary residence so comfortable as to wish it would become permanent, but since the villa's owners were as reluctant to sell as Mediha Hanim was keen to buy, the parties had ended up in a bidding war where Mediha Hanim's victory came at an exorbitant cost — one that could only be justified by her absolute confidence that, after countless wanders in the provinces, from the Danube to Syria and from the Circassians to the Balkans, Salonica was sure to be their final residence.

But Allah had other plans, as she herself later emphasised with an apologetic smile. A few years after ordering the exile, perhaps having gained a better sense of the difference between a "real" plot and an "imaginary" one, the Sultan regretted his decision. He sent word that Ibrahim Pasha was now needed in Constantinople to advise the government on the new Baghdad railway project, and he also sent a reconciliation gift: a collection of one hundred canaries in a large golden cage the size of an entire room, which arrived one early morning by steamboat, accompanied by a somewhat mysterious note, handwritten by the Sultan himself: "Birds have no thoughts, but they always perform the right action: sing". And so, Ibrahim Pasha had no choice but to sing too, moving back to the capital with his wife and young daughter Shefikat, leaving his now grown-up son to look after the properties, and leaving behind the canaries too. Mediha Hanim took care to ensure their continuity: whenever a bird died, a replacement was rapidly brought in to ensure the number of birds stayed fixed at one hundred.

She was convinced that the canaries brought the house good luck — a belief that acquired the status of a scientific theory after two eventful occurrences. The first one, the Sultan Abdul Hambid's own exile to Salonica, happened when he was deposed by the Young Turks and sent to live in the villa Allatini, the house of another Jewish merchant, in a reversal of fortunes that, according to Mediha Hanim could only be a providential sign. The second occurrence was in 1917, when a great fire in Salonica destroyed most of the houses, cafes, government buildings, hotels, banks, shops, churches, and mosques in the city centre, changing forever the shape of the city. Their house, which was located near Vassilis Olgas Street, survived intact. "The whole world is on fire", Mediha Hanim said upon hearing the news from her son, "but Allah spared us; for us *c'est toujours* S*alonique la magnifique*".

This, rather than anything to do with the practicalities of life as a widow, explained her counter-intuitive decision to return to the city just over one year later, exactly when most Muslims were moving to Turkey voluntarily, and Greek refugees returning from the war in Anatolia were found begging on every street corner. Mediha Hanim occasionally struggled to find her way home since all the old Ottoman roads had been given Christian names after the Greek annexation of the city, and new buildings were beginning to replace those destroyed by the fire but even this did not seem to upset her. Salonica remained *Salonique la magnifique*.

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“Selim, the street vendor, is going tomorrow”, Mediha Hanim announced. “He’s taking his sons; they couldn’t find places for everyone, his wife and the girls will be on the next boat, *inshallah, si Dieu le veut…*”

She paused for a moment, then seemed to realise something that upset her terribly.

“Where am I going to find the leeches now? Oh dear, I really did not need this news today, yes, I know it’s your birthday *ma chère* and we are supposed to celebrate”, she turned to Leman, “but my stomach has been so bad recently… once this supply of leeches runs out, I don’t know how I am going to cope…”

“*Mais maman*”, her daughter Shefikat quizzed her. “The poor man has to leave everything behind without knowing if half of his family will make it, and all you worry about is your leeches?” A tall young woman with delicate features and an alert look, she was wearing a silk white dress at the centre of which hung a pince-nez where one would have expected to see a necklace.

“I don’t know how you can go on talking like that about people, as if you were talking about sheep. Come Leman, let’s leave them to argue about the subcommittee, let’s go and practice some reading”, she said to her niece. But Leman hesitated to follow her, and went to sit on her father’s lap instead.

“Thank God for the subcommittee”, Leman’s father, Avni Bey continued where he had left off. “I must say, there was a bit of queue, but it was all done very methodically in the end, and those gentlemen from the League of Nations were extremely respectful, we certainly had a chance to communicate our views at length and in an orderly manner and they were also taking extensive notes…”

“Methodically… orderly… extensive notes — have you been down to the port?”, Shefikat interrupted him impatiently, standing by the veranda exit.. “It’s absolute chaos out there”, she said, pointing in the direction of the sea, glimmering in the horizon. “Women screaming, children lost before they even embark on boats. People are told they’re not allowed to take anything so they try to sell whatever they can. You could buy a flat for the price of a ferry crossing.”.

“I disagree”, Avni Bey answered calmly. “It would be even worse without the agreement. If they leave people to their own devices, there’ll be no end to the bloodshed. You can’t rely on the Turks and the Greeks to sort it out, it’s good they made a deal, they have a framework now, an international agreement to work with. Without it, even we would have had our skin peeled by the Greeks”.

“But they had a framework, and they destroyed it”, Mediha Hanim intervened. “Ibrahim Pasha worked tirelessly in his last years. Nobody seemed to want the Balkan league then, even though it was only a small step, a minor technical modification, and look at them now. What do they turn to? The society of states? The League of Nations? Does anyone know what this‘league’ of nations even means? I am sorry, I cannot see any old nations united in peace, all I see is new nations making new wars… people are being slaughtered like never before”.

“I disagree”, Avni Bey, objected again, now slightly impatiently. “The framework is crucial, and the agreement is a very civilised way to stop the fighting. *Maman*, you don’t understand, you live in the past. And, of course, you are not the one who has to worry about the land and the workers. I spent the whole day arguing about numbers: who is forced to go, how many have a choice, and whether Greek refugees could be trusted to replace the departing Muslims, to you they’re all just servants…”.

He had never liked being the only one in charge of administrative issues, and found the new equation of politics and commerce almost impossible to get his head around. He became especially irritable when his mother intervened. Instead of helping him, she kept asking irrelevant questions, interrogating, for example, why the properties had ended up here rather than there, why focus on Greece instead of thinking about Albania - as if they’d ever had a say on where to draw the border. All pointless questions, Avni Bey thought, all just a way of obstructing and delaying concrete decisions for which in the end he was the only one responsible.

“You are the one who does not understand *mon cher*”, Shefikat said with an air of insolence. “*Maman* is right. There was a framework, and they destroyed it. What else was the Porte if not what you call a *framework*. Ibrahim Pasha had seen it coming even before the Balkan wars. Of course, once the killing started it was pointless. But they never listened to him, his suggestions were ignored because they had no name to make the idea acceptable, as if finding a name would help them solve the problem”.

“Oh, but it does”, interrupted Doctor Elias, who had been listening to the exchange, quietly smoking a French cigar. “Labels are crucial. Without labels you have no definitions, without definitions you have no categories, without categories you can't order anything, it's chaos. Lord Curzon, a rather wise Englishman, put it rather well. He called it "the unmixing of peoples". But how can you unmix if you don't know what was mixed in the first place?"

Mediha Hanim turned towards him with an expression of concern. Sitting at the table, waving a pink fan made of lace to cool herself, she was mulling over something which, judging by the contortions on her face and the occasional mysterious motion of her head left and right, she was unable to resolve.

"Doctor Elias", she said. "Do you think we can find another black-market dealer? I'm rather worried about those leeches…".

Doctor Elias shook his head with a cryptic expression that made Mediha Hanim lower her fan, and look at him with an air of intense expectation. He met her eyes and after a brief pause, followed by another mysterious headshake, he picked up exactly where he had left off.

"I have the instructions here. The guidance they have given is unambiguous".

He drew a typeset sheet from the inside pocket of his blazer, unfolded it carefully, and read out:

"*In examining more fully the various factors mentioned, the delegation concluded that place of origin should be taken into consideration if it is clearly established by the proofs which the person concerned is able to produce. Thus, if an individual can prove, either by means of an official document or by trustworthy witnesses, that he or one of his paternal ancestors came from an Albanian district, the origin of this person* *should not be questioned. On the other hand, the delegation is of the opinion that it would not be justified in regarding as of Albanian origin persons who vaguely assert that they are of Pelasgic origin, because such origin, if it could be proved, would not constitute an exclusive presumption of Albanian origin, since the Pelasgians, the ancient inhabitants of Epirus, are the common ancestors of both Albanians and Greeks.*”

With slow, deliberate movements, he folded the paper once more and slipped it back into his pocket.

“Here we go. Couldn’t be clearer. Now, think about what you were asked today at the subcommittee: WHAT ARE YOU?”

He paused briefly expecting an answer to the question, but when everyone in the veranda started to roll their eyes perplexed, he decided to step in again.

“It’s a deceptively simple question, so simple you may not even know where to start. I know, believe me, we Jews have the same problem. Just think about it for a moment. “What are you?”.

Another silence followed. Leman looked from her aunt, whose gaze was fixed on the horizon, to her grandmother, then to her father. Gently, Avni Bey nudged her off his lap and reached for a ring of amber beads resting on the marble table, slipping them through his fingers one by one, as if counting different possible options.

“It seems you don’t know how to answer this question”, Elias continued unperturbed. “But you’re thinking too hard, it’s just a label, a convention. As a matter of fact, you don’t even have to have an answer. You can just pretend because so much is at stake. Without your answer, those gentlemen from the League of Nations wouldn't know how to implement their rules, and the deadline for completing the exchange is only four months away. When you said to them you were brought up as Muslims, but you occasionally spoke *Albanian* at home, well, there you go, it may be a grey area but it's still helpful. They can't make up their minds, the framework can't choose for you, so you must choose for yourself. Indeed, one of the criteria mentioned is "national consciousness", the delegation insists that the "very categorical desire of the population to be included or not in the exchange should not be disregarded".

He tried to reach again into his pocket to pull out the guidance, as if to confirm he remembered everything well.

"Doctor Elias, not that paper, not those words again please!", exclaimed Mediha Hanim. "They give me stomach cramps".

"Alright, alright", he replied, "but it's a remarkably flexible framework, you have to admit…"

"Well, it's not flexible for the poor fellow who just showed up at the door", Shefikat objected.

Mediha Hanim spotted Dafne with a tray of rose water and asked her to bring back the leech jars. She opened one of them and started to count.

"*Un, deux, trois*…", she could be heard mumbling to herself but when Selim's name was mentioned a second time, she raised her eyes with a hopeful expression.

"That poor man didn't choose to be born speaking Turkish or Albanian" Shefikat now looked at her, "nor did he have a say on whether to sign or not to sign the framework. And yet, there he is, tomorrow he's off to where he's told he belongs, even though he's never seen it before, he doesn't even know if he will make it across safely. And anyway, regardless of that, it's a highly dangerous precedent. Now every time there is a war they will think it's a good idea to start swapping people around, to force them to move from one side of the border to the other, all in the name of an orderly settlement. I find it frankly terrifying".

"I remember how we used to complain about Ibrahim Pasha's exile", Mediha Hanim said. "And how even he said it was not *right*, a word he did not use lightly, *vous le savez bien*. Well at least he was only one … now they're forced to relocate by the hundreds of thousands".

Leman was alarmed to hear that depending on what she chose to call herself, she might find herself packed up on a boat, and lose her parents on the way.

"What are you", she repeated Doctor Elias' words in her head. Was she Leman Leskoviku or Ibrahim Bey, was she a boy or a girl, was she Greek or Turkish or Albanian, and in any case why did she speak French?

A few weeks ago, her aunt Shefikat had told her about a place in Switzerland, where people communicated in French — just like them — and where in the summer one could swim in a lake called Leman — just like her – a city called Lausanne where important people had gathered to sign a document needed to make peace after the war. And that document, Shefikat had said, once it was signed, well, it told everyone what they were, and where they were supposed to live, and depending on what they called themselves it could be very different from where they had lived before, which is why the port was so busy in the last few months, and everyone on the streets asked each other if and when they were leaving, whether by any chance they had anything to sell beforehand, and if they had found space on the steamer boats.

But Leman also thought about the silence that had followed Doctor Elias's question – what are you? — and about how her father had pushed her away from his lap just when he was asked to answer it, as if it made him uncomfortable, or even angry, and as if it was her fault that he didn't know how to respond. She also remembered Shefikat's vain attempts to reassure her that she, Leman, had nothing to be afraid of, they were Albanian certainly, but since they had never lived in Albania before, they weren't exactly like the other Albanians across the mountains because, unlike those Albanians, in her family they had Greek papers and when they travelled, everyone thought they were Greek, and they spoke Greek just like the Greeks. It had not helped. Leman knew, that they weren't the same kind of Greek as the other Greeks, since they celebrated Eid and not Easter, and for Eid they invited Doctor Elias, who always came unless it was a Saturday, and reminisced about the old days. In those days, before the fire, he would say, the canaries sang as loud as the imam of Hamza Bey Mosque, but when the mosque's minaret was removed, their singing turned sad, and Leman sometimes wondered if that was really the case. To her, the canaries always sounded cheerful. Even if one died, it went unnoticed. They continued to sing all the same; perhaps it was Doctor Elias who had turned sad, Leman thought.

But now she understood that there were others who celebrated Eid, people like Selim, who was not lucky enough to call himself Albanian, and simply had to leave because that's what those gentlemen on lake Leman had decided. Were they the same gentlemen who had invited her father to explain? What if Avni Bey, instead of answering their questions, had rolled his eyes in embarrassment, and counted his beads? What if the *subcommittee* — now she knew exactly what it meant — did not believe a single one of his answers?

She could feel her heart pounding, and her knees started to shake. The more she thought about it, the more afraid she felt that she might soon become the same as Selim and his children, packed up on a boat to travel God knows where. She left the veranda and ran inside the house. She would quiz her aunt Shefikat again, if those gentlemen had understood everything properly, and what it all ment - Shefikat was the only one whose explanations she trusted.

In the corridor, she stopped before the large portrait of her grandfather, Ibrahim Pasha, admiring his distinguished pose, the grave look on his face, the distant, deep blue, eyes that made it impossible to gauge his emotions, the grey hair that contrasted with the dark red colour of the fez. Everything in the painting filled the observer with fear and awe. Yet, if even that man who had fought all his life to save the great Sultan of the great Ottoman Empire, if even Ibrahim Pasha would not have been able to answer the questions of the *subcommittee* or stop the lakeside delegation, what hope was there for the rest of them?

3

Everything Has a Price

"*I had a vague feeling that no emotion of the heart could influence him. He considers a human being a fact or a thing, not a fellow man*".

Leman, now almost twelve, paused her reading and looked at her aunt perplexed. "I don't understand", she said. "Did she dislike him?"

Shefikat did not hear at first. Her eyes were fixed on the carpet under her feet, as if she had just finished digging a large hole in the ground and was inspecting to see how deep it reached.

"*We need to believe that such a man is tormented by his own nature, in order to tolerate the fact that this nature makes others suffer so*", Leman continued to read.

"Had he done something to her?", she asked again. "She clearly couldn't stand him. Did he not love her?".

Shefikat only caught the last part of the sentence and it seemed to annoy her vaguely.

"What makes you think it's about the two of them?", she asked. "She's talking about ideas, not feelings. If you want love, read *Madame Bovary*, not Madame De Stael".

Leman shrugged, and leafed through the book, pausing to inspect the front and back covers. "*Madame de Stael. Considerations on the Princial Events of the French*

Revolution. Chapter XXVI. Treaty of Campo Formio, General Bonaparte's Arrival in Paris".

It never ends, she thought. This *Revolution Française*, when will it finish. Shefikat had taught her that it was one of the most important events in history. You could tell it was important by the amount of terror it had provoked: terror usually went hand in hand with a strong desire to save humanity, she had explained. Then she had made Leman memorise the key dates: January 24, Louis XVI summons the Estate Generals; July 14, the Storming of the Bastille; August 26, Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Here, Shefikat had struggled a little, it was the declaration of the rights of *man* after all, but the ideas of the French revolution, she insisted, mattered more. '*Liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité'* - she had asked Leman to memorise those too - once the words were out, they had the potential to become more deadly than the deadliest of weapons. People could no longer be considered the property of God, the king, or the sultan, not even of Greek prime minister Venizelos who had just returned from the world of the politically dead to win elections a second time. If only women learned how to use these ideas to fight for their rights, words could also become weapons for them.

Leman had tried to imagine what these deadly weapons looked like but for some reason she could only think of harmless kitchen utensils. *Liberté* appeared to her like a large ladle of the kind needed to scoop up Noah's pudding on Ashure day, *égalité* a sort of silver colander, and *fraternité*, that one was a little harder, and she could only picture it with some effort, but at most like a collection of rolling pins of different thicknesses and lengths. She also pictured her mother, Ismet, waving them in the kitchen because that was where Ismet usually concentrated her efforts to save humanity: supervising the servants, planning meals, ensuring the right kind of wine would be served with the right food, and so on. Leman loved her mother - she was sweet, hardworking and always in a good mood, but always a little boring, even the games she came up were not that exciting. Ismet played the piano well, and carried her brown wavy hair in a sleek bob cut, a concession to the new fashion trends. Yet, she rarely read books: the few she did pick up contained no stories or pictures, only instructions on cooking. The day Leman learned about the French revolution, she ventured in the kitchen to inform her mother about that turning point in history, and found Ismet all sprinkled with flour from the pie she was making. When she heard from Leman that women had rights as well, she became strangely despondent.

“If you don’t like cooking, you must learn how to knit”, she said. “The way your father’s business is going, you’ll have to work for a living one day. Needlework will be more useful than all this babble”.

Leman ran back to report her mother’s words to Shefikat.

“We’re now going to move on to the rise and fall of Napoleon.”, her aunt retorted. “And anyway, what’s wrong with working for money? If you and I worked, we wouldn’t depend on what he’s left us”, she said, glancing at the painting of Ibrahim Pasha that hung on the wall, and for an instant Leman thought she saw a copper Ashure bowl instead of his faded red fez.

“Marengo June 1800, Austerlitz 1805, Jena-Auerstädt 1806, Borodino 1812… you’d better learn the names of the battles too”. Yet Leman was confused. Why did Napoleon go around spreading the ideas of the French Revolution with real cannons and bayonets instead of the deadly words she had just learned about? And if he liked the Republic so much, she asked, why did he go on to proclaim himself King of the French?

“That’s why Madame de Stael despised him”, Shefikat became animated. “She believed in freedom. What sort of freedom can the bayonets and the guillotines bring? Perhaps Napoleon thought the people would grow to love him one day. That’s what your grandmother says about Herr Gustav. True love apparently is something one needs to get used to, like a new dressing gown. She’s convinced I will grow to love him one day - so is he obviously. Oh, but I do have a choice, not so much on whether to marry him but on when. He’s coming around again later, and… and *he is short*” she said, with her eyes back on the book, in a way that made Leman wonder if her aunt was referring to Gustav or the new French character.

“He looks much better on horseback than on foot. In everything, it is war and only war that suits him”, she continued to read.

“Was he that short?”, Leman interrupted again, picturing Napoleon or Gustav on a horse, waving around a large kitchen ladle.

“Shorter than me”, her aunt said. “But taller than Herr Gustav”.

Then Shefikat went quiet, and one could almost hear the ticking of the small watch that hung from her long neck, and the clinking sound it made as it collided with her pince-nez. With each collision she reacted in a startled way, as if she'd heard the noise for the first time. As a child, everyone said she would become a beauty: she had dark blue eyes, thick black hair and delicate facial features, as if Allah had made her on a Sunday, when he was relaxing, her mother would say. But now that she was almost twenty-six, she carried that beauty awkwardly, like a childhood accident with which she'd never learned to live. She was taller than average, and walked slightly curved, often with her eyes down on a heavy book, which she brought with her as she sat for family meals.

“Some women carry books the way men carry watches, so they can be seen to have them”, her mother would say, just to provoke her.

“If you had let me finish college in Istanbul, instead of taking us to Salonica, I would be taking them to the university library, not to the dining table”, she replied curtly.

“*I sensed more quickly than others—and I pride myself on it—Bonaparte's tyrannical character and intention*”, Leman continued to read. “*I was the first woman he exiled... Since women, on the one hand, could in no way further his political schemes, and since, on the other hand, they were less susceptible than men to the fears and hopes that power dispensed, they irritated him like so many rebels, and he took pleasure in saying offensive and vulgar things to them*”.

“What sort of things?”, Leman asked, but Shefikat was distracted. The description of Bonaparte, or the mental image of Gustav that the description evoked, seemed to make her anxious. She stared at the carpet again. It had been a gift, an item that should have been added to her dowry, but the thought of a dowry terrified her as much as that of the man in relation to whom it was being prepared. She was disturbed by this collection of objects - embroidery, clothes, carpets - the gradual accumulation of which had the aim of softening the sudden irruption into her life of a stranger with whom she would, from now on, have to share everything. Everything? She shook her head mechanically left and right, then lowered her eyes and abandoned herself to the imaginary excavation at the bottom of the carpet, contemplating the turquoise blue rectangle with yellow flower patterns and a name - Dafne - embroidered on the bottom right.

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Dafne had joined the family of Ibrahim Pasha as a maid when she was around fifteen, on the day in which Armenian revolutionaries tried to assassinate Sultan Abdul Hamid. She had never known the date of her own birth, but she remembered this one exactly: 21 July 1905. Rumour had it that she was in the room when Ibrahim Pasha drew his last breath, and that there was a mystery associated to his death that only Dafne could resolve. Yet she had never either confirmed or denied the allegations, partly concerned by Mediha Hanim's retaliation, and partly because she shared Doctor Elias's views that in the end it didn't matter, in death everyone is the same. She preferred to concentrate on life, and had followed the family to Salonica, devoting herself to looking after Leman as a newborn. Later, Shefikat had taught Dafne how to read and write, Leman had taught her how to say "comment-allez vous Monsieur", and Dafne, whose voice was said to be superior to that of Rosa Eskenazi, the Jewish *rembetika* singer who delighted Salonican tavernas before the war, had taught them both a lullaby about canaries from the Anatolian village in which she was born. She was sometimes reluctant to sing since she aspired to become a proper nanny, like all those Swiss ladies that now worked for well-to-do families in Salonica, and wondered whether singing about canaries was the kind of thing Swiss nannies did, thinking that they possessed extraordinary skills she would never have such as punctuality, a capacity to mind their own business, and the one she found hardest, emotional indifference.

She sometimes tried to master the first two, and she was convinced she had mastered the third. But then came the order - from Switzerland of all places - to leave Salonica and relocate to Sille in Anatolia, where Dafne had been born as a Muslim Turk, and at that point the thought that a Swiss nanny would replace her turned into the curse she had always foreseen. For a while, she hoped Avni Bey would resolve the issue, especially after he wrote to the subcommittee, inquiring if Dafne could be considered their property and allowed to stay with the family in Greece. But after a few further documents were sent, it turned out that, in the eyes of the law, she had to be her own master.

When Avni Bey delivered the news – usually she communicated with Mediha Hanim but the gravity of this situation prescribed otherwise - Dafne remained composed, and silent throughout, she even thanked him at the end with a curtsy of the kind she had seen (or imagined) Swiss nannies to perform. She prepared her only suitcase, tried to avoid disturbing anyone with the innumerable questions that kept her awake at night, and seemed fully prepared to move on. She tried to think positively about the fact that now that she was her own property she could take herself *anywhere* she fancied – well, perhaps not anywhere, but certainly "anywhere" in Turkey, or at least anywhere in Sille, Anatolia. It reassured her to know that Anywhere-Turkey was founded by Ataturk, a Salonican boy, who had grown up where she used to go shopping in the Koça Kasim Pasha district, and, who knows, perhaps just like her, he had also been to pray in Hamza Bey Mosque. And those gentlemen in Switzerland, they must know what they're doing, she thought - or at least she convinced herself again that this is what a Swiss nanny would think. But then she heard rumours that the Greek authorities were planning to list the very Hamza Bey Mosque as "exchangeable property", and to convert it into a telephone exchange centre. And the idea of people who, instead of whispering Allahu-akbar turned towards the Mekka, would now shout and argue with each other in Greek over a black cable, broke her. She discovered that emotional indifference did not come naturally; perhaps she had been wrong all along to think of herself as a Swiss nanny in the making. In the days and weeks before her departure, she would suddenly run to the veranda, look at the canaries and the sea, and sob uncontrollably. In the evenings, when all her duties for the day were completed, she would sit down to knit the blue carpet which was a parting gift for Shefikat. She sang the canary song to herself half weaving and half crying, praying that in the morning she would wake up to find the carpet undone.

"It's for your dowry", was all she could muster as she embraced Shefikat at the departure dock, shaking like a rattle in the hands of a toddler. “I won’t be there on your wedding day, but when you walk on the carpet in your new home, you will remember poor Dafne and all the tears she shed when she had to leave her home…”

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“I almost bought the exact same carpet in the Kapani market”, Shefikat heard a familiar, voice whisper from behind her back in a thick German accent. Gustav Heym had crept into the salon unnanounced, and advanced toward the two women in silence, like a stain that spreads unnoticed. He wore a long, black coat, buttoned up to his neck, from which emerged a small bald head. He had cold, grey eyes and a calculating expression reminiscent of the winter torpor and entrepreneurial spirit of his hometown, a once important Hanseatic centre by the North Sea. He had been observing the lesson from a distance for a while, and as he came closer to Shefikat, a strong smell of tobacco clenched at her throat making her feel slightly nauseous.

Gustav Heym had only visited Salonica a few times, even though his mother had been born not too far from there, in the seaport town of Kavala, to a wealthy landowning family. His father had once owned the largest tobacco manufacture in Hamburg, accumulating wealth thanks to his wife’s connections in what was then one of the largest tobacco cultivation centres of the Ottoman Empire. Gustav’s mother had died young - he barely remembered her. His father suffered from depression and hanged himself many years later, at which point the young man, who until then had only shown interest in smoking tobacco rather than producing it, had to take charge of the family business. He was both lazy and arrogant: enrolled to study architecture in Berlin, he had dropped out after failing the first design project, blaming his teacher's mediocrity for his persistent lack of inspiration. Still, he thought of himself as a man of culture and, to prove it, every now and then he would go to the opera to listen to the Ring der Nibelungen, though around the time in which the second act began he usually developed a headache and left. In the same spirit, he was sometimes spotted in his father's study with a copy of a book about the genealogy of morality - he especially appreciated a part of one sentence in brackets that opposed the "modern softness of feelings" - but he barely made it past those first few pages. He was interested in politics superficially but, when the war started, he became a fervent patriot. Not necessarily because he loved Germany but, since war required taking sides, to contemplate anything other than hatred for the enemy would have entailed a degree of reflexivity that Gustav only reached after a few glasses of Northern beer, and that usually washed away from his body with the hangover the morning after.

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"Herr Gustav, you're early", Shefikat said, closing the books and clearing the pages of handwritten notes on the table, urging Leman to do the same. When she had finished tidying up, she moved from the study table to a green velvet armchair, crossing her legs. There was always something inscrutable in her expression, an air of formality which she maintained even with close family members. She had inherited her father's inquisitive gaze, and a slightly cold, occasionally scornful, expression, which forced those who encountered it for the first time to look down, as if caught in the middle of committing an offence.

“I thought the market tour would take me longer”, Gustav mumbled, lowering his eyes to the carpet, half intimidated, half angered by the condescendence with which he felt Shefikat treated him. She was about to become his fiancée, or so he had been promised, but he resented the distance she put between them, the reprimands that one could read in her austere expression. The way she answered his questions with one or two brief sentences made their interactions awkward, and despite his usual eloquence he struggled to find topics of conversation.

“It’s marvellous to see how well the refugees from Turkey have settled in the market, isn’t it”, he said, as she continued to fix him in silence. “It’s a little cramped of course, and more than a little noisy with all the modernisation works after the fire on Egnatia street. But what bazaar isn’t cramped?”.

Shefikat remained quiet, as if she’d sealed her voice in an old Ottoman storage box.

“And of course, as soon as they hear a foreign accent, the prices go up… have you noticed Mademoiselle?”, he asked with a chuckle. “It makes me think the newspapers exaggerate when they ask if Asia Minor Greeks are really Greek, or question the merits of the population exchange … those refugees have certainly learned how to behave like locals”…

Shefikat had planned to respond with one or two polite sentences but the way he said “population exchange” irritated her - she hated the term - and she chose to remain silent. Feeling awkward, he turned towards Leman with an expectant air, as if it was the young girl he had come to see.

Leman felt a little sorry for him. “Are you a businessman?”, she asked.

Gustav nodded emphatically, then turned again towards Shefikat.

“I wasn’t going to buy a carpet for five thousand drachmas” - there was a hint of despair in his voice as he tried at all costs to communicate with his fiancée. “I got this beautiful old Ottoman dagger instead”.

He opened the paper bag and pulled out a seemingly antique copper sword, looked at it admiringly, passed it from one hand to the other, and waved it ceremonially in the air a few times. Then, with a hesitant gesture, he handed it to Shefikat. Reluctant to take it at first, she eventually stretched her arm, and carefully went to inspect the handle. When she noticed the tiny print on it, she gave him a polite smile and decided that the humiliating revelation could wait.

“Interesting”, she whispered, handing the dagger over to Leman, who also looked straight at the handle.

“Made in Germany”, she read in her head, exchanging a complicit smile with her aunt.

“Clearly a bargain”, Shefikat said.

“A very good deal indeed”, Gustav could barely contain his pride. “It’s not about the money, really, but there must be a certain, how shall I put it… fairness in the exchange. One doesn’t want to feel - forgive me for saying so - exploited by those Anatolian refugees. I wonder how much you paid for your carpet?”

“We didn’t buy it”, Leman volunteered.“It’s a present from Dafne”.

“Dafne…?”, Gustav looked perplexed. “Who is she?”

“It’s our maid”, Leman murmured, and her face turned sad. She could not bear to use the past tense when talking about her beloved nanny, despite the fact that it had been several years since Dafne had left.

“A wonderful artist!”, boomed Gustav, staring longingly at Shefikat. “What do you think Mademoiselle”, he pressed her, “how much would Dafne sell this carpet for?”

He can only think of buying and selling, Shefikat thought. That’s how he views marriage. Like a contract for the use of body parts.

“What if Dafne didn’t want to sell her carpet, Herr Gustav?”, she asked despondently.

Gustav smiled innocently, without noticing the anger in her voice. He bent over the carpet and opened the palm of his hand to gently caress the yellow patterns on the fabric, as if he expected the object, after appropriate handling, to resolve the mystery of its own worth.

“Mademoiselle”, he said, moving so close to Shefikat that she was forced to vacate her armchair. “It’s all about naming the right amount”, he said, now sitting down in her place. “Everything has a price”.

4

To Take Risk

Gustav had started to consider himself a businessman only several years after his father’s death. Heym senior had left behind a suicide letter in which he pleaded with his only son to save the family company come what may - an odd request for someone who decided their own life was not worth saving, or so Gustav thought when he decided to ignore his father’s wish. He had never felt anything for the old man, who had sent him to a boarding school near Trieste shortly after his mother died: neither hostility nor attachment, neither resentment nor loyalty. He’d found the letter neatly folded in the inside pocket of his father’s coat, just as he had found the old man hanging from a lamppost, his glasses dangling from the left ear, a fallen ladder to his right. He was making his way home back from the opera one gusty winter evening, when he spotted from a distance something that waved like a flag, until he realised the flag was his father. It annoyed him, not so much what had happened, as all the bureaucratic chores he suddenly became responsible for: the announcement telegrams, the funeral, the will. He did not burn the letter - it would have meant something then. Instead, he left it to gather dust in his father’s study, where he now sat undisturbed to read his new favourite paper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*.

By 1929, the family business was struggling but Gustav's neglect was to blame only in part. Prices had been steadily rising, larger tobacco companies such as Reemtsma, Haus Neuerburg, Garbaty and Greiling had formed cartels that controlled almost ninety percent of the market. Smaller firms like Heym's risked being strangled even when they were led by dynamic entrepreneurs. After the end of the war, Germany had lost both territory and colonies, and the harsh terms imposed by the Versailles treaty meant that there were few lands one could turn to for adequate raw material. A new tax on tobacco leaves stored in factories hurt small businesses in particular. Until the Balkan wars, most of the tobacco arrived from the Ottoman Empire via the Trieste-to-Dresden railway. The market was now much more fragmented but German cigarette consumers, notoriously reluctant to experiment with American and European brands, retained their preference for the Oriental - milder and sweeter - variety. There was high demand for cigarettes, but the costs of production had become prohibitive, which made the situation complicated for companies like his.

Gustav began to take a serious interest in the tobacco factory only when he realised his own survival depended on it. He would drop by his father's office several times a week and spend countless hours swaying back and forth in Heym's red leather rocking chair. He inspected sales' charts, immersed himself in statistics, and studied his competitor's strategies with a dedication Heym senior would have never thought his son capable of, just as he would have never recognised the circumstances that produced such a dramatic shift in attitude.

One day, someone in a meeting recalled his father’s words: “Rescuing a dying business”, Heym senior had said with the tone of a general who surveys a deserted battlefield, “is akin to fighting an asymmetric war. There’s only one thing that can turn fortune around: the bravery of ordinary soldiers. And the commercial equivalent of military distinction is to take risk”.

To take risk. Inspired by those words, Gustav embarked on a journey to Kavala, his mother’s native city. He wanted to source cheaper tobacco leaves by rekindling her family connections but discovered soon after his arrival that all the surviving relatives had been deported after the Bulgarian occupation of the city. He could not remember why and where exactly, and it mattered little in any case, since the new place bore no relation to cigarette production. “It happened during the war, that’s all I can say”, he explained to Avni Bey when they first met at the Tobacco Office of Salonica.

They had bonded during one of the regular gatherings of merchants and producers, after a session in which Avni Bey had stood up to protest at a delegate’s demand for equal representation of workers and peasants in a committee for credit policy. Nobody is denying them *some* representation, Avni Bey had shouted in rage, waving his colourful marble beads in the air, but *equal*? Have these gentlemen ever met a real peasant or a real worker? Are they aware that such characters barely know how to count to ten?

During the break, Gustav followed him into the corridor to personally thank Avni Bey for the bravery shown during the meeting. *Monsieur*, he said in his thick German-accented French, I want to convey my gratitude to you for articulating so clearly and thoughtfully what we were all thinking but unfortunately lacked the courage to express. In my own country such sentences have become taboo - they now have parties for those *workers* and *peasants*, you know, he added with a smirk, and they have party schools too, where everyone is taught to read, count and hate. If only there were more people like you *Monsieur*, willing to speak their mind just as you have done, to say it loud when ‘enough is enough’, if only we were braver and less compliant, if only the real men had not all died in the war, we would be able to respond decisively to the Jewish Bolshevik threat…

The last part of the sentence caught Avni Bey by surprise. He felt it would be inappropriate to point out that, as far as he was concerned, the only serious threat to peace was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, so he nodded vigorously, rubbed his hands in excitement, then, after a few more jokes were exchanged, offered to continue the conversation over drinks and dinner in the newly renovated Hotel Continental. The one where the mayor might soon host the second edition of Miss Thessaloniki, he explained, to make the invitation more enticing.

They had barely taken their places, ordered a sardine meze, and opened the first bottle of raki when Gustav confessed how much he loathed the modern “softness of feeling” displayed by

Europe's liberal governments: one day they raised tariffs, another day they lowered them, one day they decided to discipline the workers, another they yielded to their demands. "What I find most irritating", Gustav said, keen to develop his father's martial metaphor, "is this talk that the war is over, and we must now cooperate to build democracy and peace. Well, perhaps it *is* over *Monsieur*, but only for politicians, certainly not for the entrepreneurs, not for the people like us".

"Absolutely, *Monsieur*", Avni Bey spoke decisively, like a soldier repeating his general's commands. "The market is our front". He briefly scratched his bald head as if searching something else to add but when nothing came to mind, he reached into the breast pocket of his blazer for a small silver box filled with cigars, picked up one for himself, offered another one to Gustav, and inhaled a few times in solemn silence.

"Take this cigar, *Monsieur*. It tastes of nothing. Why? Because ever since everyone has received from the government a plot of land in which to grow tobacco, the quality has disappeared. What else can one expect?". The only reason he continued to smoke, he explained, was to be able to make the case from a position of authority. Eleftherios - Avni Bey had only seen Venizelos once at an election rally, but he had collected his hat when the Prime Minister had dropped it accidentally, then sat close enough to the front to feel entitled to use his first name - Eleftherios had made a catastrophic mistake in accepting the Turkish government's argument that Greek properties in Asia

Minor were worth far less than Muslim properties in Greece. Now everyone was paying the price, and everyone was angry.

Like Gustav's, Avni Bey's affairs had also been deteriorating of late. Opportunities for trade were increasingly few and tightly regulated. Of course, there were the odd links with Europe through the Ottoman Empire. His father had been a pasha, he said with a hint of pride, did Gustav know what a pasha was? Never mind, he smiled affably, things were easier then. Now one had to reckon with competition from Bulgaria and Turkey, who benefitted from the same trade networks but where businesses were less harassed. Loans by the newly founded Agricultural Bank were difficult to obtain. With taxes high and the entire sector so strongly regulated, most merchants were selling at a loss. He paused to down another shot of raki, feeling the heat deep in his throat.

Perhaps they shouldn't have stayed in Salonica, he continued. The land obtained in Greece in exchange for the sale of that in Turkey turned out to be much less productive than they envisaged. The value of his latest investments in the stock market had collapsed. The people he employed, many of them refugees, spent more time collecting slogans than tobacco leaves. Then there were the odd unions to reckon with: they had become increasingly aggressive, and their numbers were swelling. But even without them, more than one and a half million Greeks had flown from Asia Minor since the collapse of the Empire. The government had given them land in which to grow tobacco for subsistence, and alright, it had traditionally been a highly lucrative business but what business can accommodate a million and a half refugees, even if they all turned out to be skilful entrepreneurs?

“Monsieur… my friend”, Avni Bey continued, “the market is like a baby who has just woken up crying, and we must nurse it back to sleep. We must sing lullabies and walk around it on tiptoes until it stops fretting and settles. But why did the baby start to cry in the first place?”

He shrugged and looked around as if he’d lost his way on a long journey, and only just realised how far he’d gone and how foreign everything had become. He could no longer recognise the faces of the waiters attending the tables, the voices of the other diners had something menacing, the language they spoke seemed barely intelligible, and this German gentleman who sat opposite him, and whom he had met for the first time only a few hours before, suddenly appeared like the only person in the world who would be able to listen and understand. He started fidgeting with his beads, then reached out again for his glass with a frown.

“Those very gentlemen who were preaching us the spirit of Geneva and extolled the virtues of freedom of trade”, he said with a tone of resigned sadness “they are the same people who now defend the businesses of their countries like virgins defending their honour”.

He swallowed another shot of raki and turned sour.

“Tobacco production they call it”, he said with a smirk, “overproduction is more like it. There are tobacco leaves growing out of people’s ears, and the cigarettes are dreadful, the worse I’ve ever smoked in my life. “Try it, if you don’t trust me”, he pressed on, sliding the small silver box across the table towards his friend.

Gustav declined politely a second time, then, as if to justify why he declined, he praised the drinks, the waiters, and the food, turning to the sardine mezze with an expression of intense concentration.

“Dreadful, dreadful”, Avni Bey repeated while inhaling and exhaling tobacco in quick succession, each time taking more in, each time his throat burning more. “You see *mon ami*”, Avni Bey said, pointing at the fish on his friend’s plate. “We’re all like this sardine, trying to save ourselves from the sharks”.

Gustav gave an awkward smile. The small bald patch on his head had turned an alarming shade of dark red.

“Yes, sharks, they’re all sharks, it’s not an exaggeration”, Avni Bey repeated. “What do your German partners make of this mess?”

“My partners?”, Gustav did not understand at first. Then he took a deep breath. “I don’t have partners. I’m on my own”.

“Bravo!”, Avni Bey exclaimed. “I am surrounded by women. My mother, my wife, my daughter. I can’t rely on anyone…”. He explained how he had recently asked Mediha Hanim for her thoughts and after ignoring him for a while, she could only think of one sentence: “Sell in Leskovik?”.

Leskovik is just on the other side of the border, Avni Bey explained, my father’s family owns property there. It’s a beautiful place, with fertile land, thermal waters, and my father once paid for a large mosque to be built in it - it used to be an important centre. When the war came it had to pay a price, like all of us. Now it’s mainly barren land. History moves forward, they say, well, for Leskovik it has only moved backwards…

Still, that’s the kind of thing his mother would come up with, he said, you had to be a woman to fathom the idea of selling immovable property in the middle of a recession. But as he uttered that sentence, a new thought struck him, his eyes widened and sparkled, his voice trembled with excitement. He became agitated like a schoolboy who has suddenly solved a complex equation. Leskovik… Leskovik is now in Albania, he thought, surprised that such an obvious thought had never occurred to him before. Leskovik… Albania… he repeated, first to himself, then louder, and what had only been a language for him, now became a country, an answer. The Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had recently issued a circular in which diplomatic offices were informed of business opportunities in the country, and his family's name was on the list. Perhaps he had been too conservative to only think about Salonica, perhaps his new friend was right. It was a war after all, and he should join the ranks of those taking risk. He tossed the butt of his cigarette, downed another shot of raki, and this time it was the fire of hope he felt burning inside his throat.

"I have an idea", he said, and started to explain it to his new friend.

If the two of them partnered, Gustav could become one of the first entrepreneurs to introduce machinery of the sort they had in Germany. Modern techniques would help cut the costs of harvesting tobacco, they would need fewer people, and profits would flow. Politically, there was little to fear: there were no workers movements in Albania since there were no factories, no capitalists, no industrial production, only peasants and brigands, brigands and peasants, and a few gentlemen like himself, and their Balzac-loving wives. They tried progressive politics a few times, Avni Bey emphasised - and in this round of drinks the tone acquired the form of a confession - but they didn't make much progress with it. "There was a so-called democratic revolution a few years ago, but it ended rather quickly, only the Bolsheviks recognised the new state".

Upon hearing the word "Bolsheviks", Gustav gave him a complicit look. There was someone who finally understood, someone with whom one could engage in commerce: an entrepreneur had found a landowner. The prime minister, Avni

Bey continued, had recently proclaimed himself king of the Albanians, promising to bring law and order. Ahmet Zogu, that was his name, perhaps, Gustav had heard it? The German's expression turned sombre, as if he were searching deep inside himself for some form of acquaintance with this new politician turned king, in whose hands the fortune of his business might lie from now on. "Better an energetic self-proclaimed monarch than those sleepy hereditary ones", he commented, when nothing came to mind, and now it was Avni Bey's turn to nod vigorously: a landowner had found an entrepreneur.

"We need one of them, in Germany too", Gustav said.

Avni Bey wondered if "by one of them" Gustav meant that they needed a landowner or an entrepreneur or an aspiring hereditary king. But in the end, it didn't matter. So long as "the one of them" was neither a peasant nor a union worker, it would be quite alright, so he nodded and, with his head now spinning like a whirling dervish, he filled Gustav's raki glass once more.

The German pushed the drink away - he needed to think. He knew little about Albania, and he never had reason to reflect on the little that he knew. The newspapers often described the country as a land of shepherds, chieftains, and fanatics of all sorts, of veiled women and stray dogs, a country in transition from vendettas to the League of Nations. The family, was sacred: everything depended on it, from raising children to protecting foreigners. Once in the house of someone, the guest became God: the family defended him as one of their own. Which was just another way of saying that the country lacked a modern police force. Albanians were notorious for not trusting each other but could one be so naive as to trust the Albanians?

Still, Gustav liked the thought of this new Albanian family replacing his deported Bulgarian one. Take risk, he repeated to himself. Or perhaps, find someone that will take a risk for you. He had no need for kindness when he negotiated deals, a contract was usually enough. But were Albanians capable of signing contracts without involving cousins? Which ties, other than blood ones, could bind? He thought for a moment, then turned to Avni Bey.

"Did you say you have a sister?", he asked. "How old is she?"

5

A Smoke-Filled Room

"My view is that one should marry first. There's plenty of time to fall in love with whoever deserves it afterwards", Mediha Hanim announced, waving her laced fan increasingly vigorously, increasingly nervously, in a last-minute attempt to persuade her daughter. "Don't listen", she then turned towards Leman, "you're almost a teenager, you'll fall in love for the first time soon, that is different".

The women - Leman, her mother Ismet, and her grandmother - were gathered in Shefikat's bedroom to see her try on the wedding gown, a sumptuous piece of long white silk that had just been delivered from a *francophone* modistra on Kapali Çarsi.

"*Quelle merveille*!", Mediha exclaimed, moving to the front to admire Shefikat. "But now you must rest *ma chérie*; I hardly slept the night before my wedding. I wish someone had told me to go to bed early!" she exclaimed before kissing her goodnight.

Shefikat embraced her mother but made a sign to Leman to stay. The room smelled of moulded paper, with antique books piled on the night table as well as old handwritten notes, maps, letters, and sketches scattered on the floor. Dozens of newspaper clippings about science were glued on the wardrobe doors – a habit Shefikat had developed in Istanbul, while studying at the Women's College, when she still hoped to do a chemistry degree at the university. One of the many plans sacrificed to *Salonique la Magnifique*, she thought.

Leman stared at her aunt and noticed how thin she had grown in the last few months. The bags under her eyes looked like bruises, and her movements had become languid. She was increasingly withdrawn, spoke little, and even during their daily lessons, she would often let her niece take the lead. They continued to study science and history together, but they no longer read novels: Shefikat now found them 'intolerably sentimental'. In the evenings, they would go strolling in Beschinar Gardens, and Leman requested a stop by the patisserie Doré, nestled on the corner of Ethnikis Amyni and Prigipos Nikolau streets. But Shefikat had lost her appetite for their famed sweets, and ordered a small cognac, staring deep inside the bottom of the iconic red glasses, once touched by the lips of Ataturk himself. And when, on their way back, they stopped by the White Tower, where workers and union organisers regularly gathered to hold speeches, Shefikat reserved the same indifference to their words as to her mother's sardonic remarks about the amount of books she collected in her room. Halfway through the rally, she would turn her back and start making her way home in silence, while Leman reluctantly trudged along, her eyes still fixed on the dais.

The date for the wedding was set for almost exactly one year after the first meeting between Gustav and Avni Bey at the Salonica Tobacco Association: 15th June 1931. The future bride and groom had met four or five times over the past few months, and on at least one of these occasions they were alone, buying flowers under the arcades of Sabri Pasha street.

Shefikat's consent to the walk had been enough to persuade Mediha Hanim that the time had come to issue engagement invitations, hold a celebratory soirée where the German consul to Salonica was invited, and serve the meal in the exquisite porcelain service she had acquired during her honeymoon in Paris. Yet she kept reassuring Shefikat that the choice of the date rested solely with her.

For a while, she meant this in earnest. She was as sincerely convinced that her daughter needed time to reflect, as she was of Shefikat's final enthusiasm about the marriage proposal. But the situation kept deteriorating: the family finances dwindled, her son kept losing money in the stock market, bureaucracy became increasingly complicated. She started to lose her patience. She was not as naive as to think that Shefikat's marriage to Gustav would change anything in the short term, but she felt compelled to act, and the only thing in her power was to exercise pressure on her daughter. She started to accuse Shefikat of being selfish, spoiled by her father, always prioritising her own whims to the needs of others. Her relatives of the same age, she said, had all long been "settled" - "settlement" was a term she deliberately chose to strip the idea of marriage of any romantic connotations.

"It's all well and good to enjoy reading books", she would say to Shefikat, "but I'm obliged to remind you that someone has to bear the cost".

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Shefikat paced the room, reluctantly holding the train of the wedding gown, embarrassed by her outfit. She was barefoot, her unruly hair cascading on her shoulders, her eyes fixed on the carpet to avoid staring at the mirror opposite.

“Don’t worry, you won’t look like a bride tomorrow, more like an Ancient Greek priestess”, Leman smiled, guessing her aunt’s feelings.

“Do you mean like someone about to meet God?”, Shefikat said with a smile. It was her first smile that day - strange, contorted, as if she tried to convince herself that she was still capable of smiling after all.

“Only the monks on Mount Athos”, Leman joked, mistaking her aunt’s remarks for a reference to an earlier conversation. “Perhaps we should go together. Fake bow tie, pencil moustache, whatever it takes”.

Shefikat shrugged. She seemed not to catch Leman’s reference to *Un mois chez les hommes*, a favourite book by Maryse Choisy, the celebrated French journalist who smuggled herself in the eleventh century monastery where women – and female animals – were banned. Choisy had cut off not only her hair but also her breasts, worn a prostate penis and, successfully disguising herself as a man, had spent over a month with the monks, eventually emerging unscathed to write a highly acclaimed book.

The story had made a strong impression on Leman but, for some reason, irritated Shefikat. Both the pain and the mastectomy were worth it in the end, Choisy had said in the many interviews that filled the newspapers. “But for what?”, Shefikat commented. To her, the spectacular popularity the book enjoyed among the well-to-do women of Salonica constituted proof of its superficiality. Leman struggled to make sense of her aunt's hostility. "It's simply that I don't understand what people find in this", she would reply with a vague tone of mockery, "the monks are there, the women are still banned from going, what do we learn from it, how clever Choisy was?"

Shefikat was irritated by the French journalist, because unlike all those female readers interested in her adventures, she had thought seriously about escaping before understanding it was too late. But when had it not been late? Perhaps when she failed to insist on studying in Istanbul. Or perhaps when she accepted the idea that she might become used to a husband she despised? Where could she go now? What had she ever been equipped to do? She had read too many books about women who tried to walk away, only to return humiliated. Was there ever an honourable escape? Perhaps only one from which there could be no return.

It occurred to Leman this would be their last night discussing books together.

"I don't think you're right about Maryse Choisy", she said. "I thought about the fact that she is, how did you put it… that she's an *attention-seeker*? I think she was incredibly brave. Wouldn't you rather go to Mount Athos than Hamburg?", she asked, with the typical innocent cruelty of a child who can sense being abandoned.

There was a pause.

"I wonder if God exists", Shefikat whispered. "And who do we really belong to, God or ourselves?"

It was Leman’s turn to shrug. The thought of her aunt’s imminent departure to that Northern city she had only seen once on a map upset here even more now that she realised their time was almost up. She would have rather escaped with her, to Mount Athos, wherever. Who knows when I will see her again, she thought, and instinctively rubbed her eyes, as if she tried to wake up from a nightmare.

“Isn’t it weird how much Gustav smells of tobacco even if he doesn’t smoke all that much?”, Leman suddenly volunteered, thinking about the man whose responsibility this all was.

“It’s unbearable. Makes my stomach churn”.

Then Shefikat paused, distracted by something she seemed unable to convey.

“Imagine a room full of smoke”, she turned to Leman, “the air becomes suffocating, and you find yourself gasping for air. Would you leave or wait for help?”

“What do you mean?”

“Since one must leave in any case, does it really matter when?”, Shefikat said pensively. “You might as well decide for yourself, rather than let it be decided for you, no?”.

Leman thought for a moment. “I don’t understand”, she repeated.

Shefikat clutched the watch that dangled from her neck, as if trying to stop it from ticking away. Her niece wrapped her arms around her.

“I’ll miss you. But you’ll come back soon to see us, yes?”

Shefikat gave her a long embrace, then stood up and went to open the window. She heard a street cart cross the road, then the smell of the acacia in the garden filled the room, making her feel dizzy. She knew she would not come back.

“Or I will come to see you? *Tu promets*?”

“It’s late”, Shefikat whispered, looking at the time on her watch. “I must rest, as *maman* says”.

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On the morning of the wedding, the bride was slow to emerge from her bedroom. It was one of those splendid June days in which the canaries chirped “as if they’d discovered the joy of singing for the first time”, Mediha Hanim said. She herself could barely contain her enthusiasm. She had woken up early and made the *coiffeuse* wait while she preventively lined up the leeches on her stomach – nothing was wrong with it that day but she wanted to enjoy the delicious food prepared without worrying about the implications. For the first time since Ibrahim Pasha’s death, she had put on make-up, sprinkled Chanel n. 5 all over herself, and was wearing a light grey, rather than entirely black dress: a new outfit that Avni Bey had brought from Paris for the occasion.

She scurried up and down the house with the mix of urgency and nervous agitation typical of preparations for important events, instructing the servants to arrange the flowers and move the furniture around only to order the opposite a few minutes after, shouting to the cooks that this or that was missing in the kitchen, then rushing back to the kitchen to explain it was not needed after all. Toward ten o’clock, the first relatives started to arrive. They asked after the bride. Mediha Hanim explained that her daughter needed time to rest, but when the guests showed signs of impatience, and she was informed that Gustav was on his way, she seemed to change her mind.

“*Ma chérie*”, she turned to Leman, “would you be so kind as to see what Shefikat is up to?”

While the girl hurried to her aunt’s bedroom, more guests kept trickling in. They were escorted into the large salon where they stopped reverentially to admire Ibrahim Pasha’s painting, as if the great man himself had stepped forward to greet them. From there, some made their way out on the veranda where they puffed cigarettes and sipped champagne, arguing about whether Prime Minister Venizelos would beat Metaxas in the upcoming elections, others admired the flower arrangements in the garden, while others still formed a circle around Mediha Hanim, who was regaling everyone with tales of the couple’s upcoming honeymoon in Italy, by Lake Garda.

When Leman returned, a few minutes later, she could hear from afar the laughter, the exclamations of admiration, the compliments to the appetizers that had just started to be served, the clatter of dishes and glasses. Standing at the entrance, clutching the small empty flask she had discovered on Shefikat’s bed, she trembled, her face as pale as a waxen statue. She peered into the room, unsure of what to do. Eventually, Mediha Hanim took notice.

“*Ah, te voilà*!”, she said, “when shall we see the bride?”

Leman approached her grandmother slowly, stopping to look around at every step. When she felt the guests’ eyes on her, her body started to shake uncontrollably, she looked up at the glass chandeliers, and felt as if they would come crushing on her.

“She… she… Shefikat isn’t moving”, she murmured, her hand instinctively rising to her mouth, as if to suppress the rest of the sentence. “She’s wearing her wedding dress, but her face is turned away. And… and… I tried to stir her… but I can’t, she is so heavy. And cold, so cold …”

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“That was the moment Shefikat’s wedding turned into her funeral”, Leman would later recall, “but I did not know it at the time”. She remembered how, upon hearing her words, Mediha Hanim made an uncontrolled movement with her head, snatched the small flask from Leman’s hands and, as she stared at it, her eyes seemed to grow larger, and mad, and she hissed something, a string of inchoate words where only the name of Doctor Elias could be recognised. She remembered how her mother Ismet, the servants, many people, all at once, ran to Shefikat’s room shouting the bride’s name, how Avni Bey hurried outside to search for the doctor, and how a hushed silence enveloped the salon while Mediha Hanim clasped her head with both hands, and tears started to stream down her face, making her melting makeup look like freshly opened wounds. She remembered how her grandmother lifted her head to look at her husband’s painting, now cursing, now praying – one moment shaking violently, and the next absolutely still, until one single, piercing, raw, scream erupted from her chest, a question that sounded like a desperate plea:

“Why my love, my beautiful, my clever Shefikat, why, why?”

And Leman remembered how at that point one of the guests, a relative of her father's, grabbed hold and escorted her outside, how she tried to release herself by clutching on to Mediha Hanim's grey satin dress, how she kicked and screamed as she was dragged on the floor, how she held on to the large oak panelled doors until her fingers bled, how she cried on the street that Shefikat was her aunt, her best friend, and that she also had a right to know.

"Later, my dear, later", her mother whispered agitated, pushing her out, and the last thing she remembered were the agonising expressions of the two or three wedding attendees who stood watch to prepare the incoming guests of the unexpected, tragic, turn of events. She noticed the quick movement with which the women wiped off their lipsticks, how some guests crossed themselves, others murmured "Allah, Allah", and others who had just arrived simply turned their backs and left. She wished she could rub off her pain, like those women wiped off their lipsticks. But she understood she was irrelevant, and that nothing would take her back to the house. She wiped the tears off her face, and in a firm, controlled voice she told her relatives she could walk by herself, and she marched ahead following people she barely knew, to a house she had never seen before.

She was told she would spend a few weeks with relatives near Sabri Pasha street, in the upper part of town. In reality, several months went by. She did not learn of her aunt's death immediately. When she asked about Shefikat, she was told she had suffered a stroke, followed by a terrible illness which required her to be cured abroad. Every now and then, her mother would come to visit. She wore the same dark, long dress every time, and brought her Viennese dark chocolate made by Ali Baba, the chef of patisserie Doré, where she used to go with Shefikat. It was the first time they spent some time in the company of each other; before Leman had mostly followed her aunt around the house. Ismet also brought with her colourful threads, saying next time she would stay longer, and teach her daughter how to knit. Things in the house were not going well, she said, Mediha Hanim needed looking after, and it was too much for her father to handle on his own. She became uncomfortable when Leman asked if she would ever be allowed to return to her house. "Of course, you will, soon, very soon *ma cherie*", her mother would say while taking leave, "we just don't know when" and kissed her on the forehead, always in a rush, always with the promise to visit her more often.

Leman was never told her aunt had taken her own life; many years would have to pass before she realised. It was one of these revelations in which the truth emerges gradually, like cracks spreading through glass. When the loss becomes obvious, the mind has already adapted, and reality settles in but its capacity to cause pain has disappeared, replaced by a sense of confusion and bewilderment, of surprise at one's willingness to believe things could have unfolded otherwise. There are still questions left, but they are general questions, of the mind rather than the heart, conjured in stark awareness that one cannot change the past, only try to remember differently..

When a room is full of smoke, and you're about to choke, should you stay or should you leave, Leman would go on to repeat mysteriously over the years. "Would it have changed anything if I had known back then? If I had told her as a child what I only discovered as a grown up? That it’s so wrong to think like that”, she would say. “So wrong to do what Shefikat did. What if there are other people in that room? What happens to them?”

She spoke about this all her life, with a mix of grief, resentment, guilt and occasionally anger. What right did Shefikat have to think that her life was only hers to decide? Perhaps she would have never done it, Leman sometimes wondered out loud, if she had known how much pain she caused, how much suffering she left behind. Was hers bravery or the ultimate cowardice? An injured animal, a broken flower always fights to live, she would insist. We, humans, fight too. Shefikat had been the first to tell her to never accept being treated like an object, and yet she had done exactly that, had turned herself into a thing, an object to be suppressed, discarded. Shefikat had taught her that words are weapons, but she had chosen the ultimate silence. She had taught her to fight, and then she had given up.

But sometimes my grandmother had second thoughts. Perhaps it was her, Leman, who was being selfish. She wondered if she was unable to see past her own emotions, if she was putting herself, and her fear of suffering first, asking of Shefikat to live her life, and experience death, not for her own sake but for that of others? If there is no honourable end in sight, isn’t ending it simply the rational thing to do? But then again, why should one’s willingness to fight depend on how things are expected to turn out? What would be the difference between doing the right thing, and learning to adapt?

6

All for the Best

After Shefikat's death in June 1931, Leman was sent to live with her relatives in an elegant white villa that had suffered near destruction during the great fire of Salonica. A talented young Jewish architect in charge of the restoration works had aptly called it "Villa Resurrection" in the plans. However, during the rebuilding process – whether due to a misunderstanding by the workers or, as some suggested, a deliberate act of defiance – a mistake was made. To the dismay of the owners, who only noticed late, when correcting the mistake had become prohibitively costly, guests entering the house were greeted with a different pair of words: "Villa Insurrection".

In Villa Insurrection, Leman found herself sharing a bedroom with her cousin Cocotte, who was a couple of years older. Cocotte had been entrusted by her father and stepmother with the responsibility of looking after Leman, making her feel welcome and distracting her from the family's misfortunes. She followed Leman everywhere and spoke uninterruptedly, mostly about nail varnish, different kinds of hair treatment, steam therapy, the benefits of drinking olive oil, healthy walking habits, newly opened modistra shops, fresh bargains in the department stores, card games (especially poker), perfumes, makeup, and boys. And she spoke with such passion, and single-minded commitment, that it took her a while to notice how Leman hardly shared her interests and how most of the time she nodded along simply out of politeness.

Leman at first disliked Cocotte. She thought of her as one of those frivolous girls about whom Shefikat used to caution with the proverb: “*vaut mieux être seul que mal accompagné*” (better alone than in bad company), except that given the circumstances her older cousin’s company seemed difficult to avoid. She was especially irritated by Cocotte’s meticulous morning routine. It all began with her cousin preparing a camomile infusion, aimed at transforming her already fair hair into an even blonder shade, followed by liberal sprays of eau de cologne, and an elaborate process of selecting dresses, which were paraded before Leman so she could help with the choice. Once Cocotte declared herself satisfied, she ceremoniously left the room, only to return a few moments later, saying she now regretted the decision: the weather was too hot or too cold for that outfit, too dry or too humid for that hairdo, too wet or too muddy for that selection of shoes – each action systematically repeated with the same unwavering precision, each change of mind announced like some catastrophic, unprecedented mistake.

“You might think I’m not a serious person because I spend so much time changing dresses in front of the mirror, and then changing my mind” she burst out one day, noticing Leman’s silent reproach.

“But look”, she said, and swiftly removed her corset, revealing a scarred upper body covered by patches of pink, brown, and red skin, where jagged and raised flesh resembled treacherous mountain paths.

"I nearly died like *maman* in the fire, in 1917," she said with a smile, noticing how Leman had instinctively turned her head away.

"I don't mind if you look. I don't remember anything; I was too young. Papà says I must make sure I enjoy everything because not many people get a second chance at life. But I like to think I'm living as if I were already dead!"

She continued to smile, but there was now something almost vindictive in her grin, as if she enjoyed making her cousin feel guilty to have judged her so harshly before. They continued to stare at each other in silence, until Leman mustered the courage to look at the scar, where Cocotte's breasts should have been, and faintly discerned the shape of a watch, much like the one that dangled from Shefikat's neck.

"Don't look so shocked," Cocotte exclaimed. "Help me zip up the corset! Do you know who makes the best corsets in town?"

After this episode, Leman's attitude toward Cocotte changed. She no longer resented her cousin's peculiar morning routine, the incessant gossip about boyfriends, or the stream of updates on perfume sales and shoe offers. They grew inseparable, much like Leman and Shefikat had been. That summer holiday, they spent their days playing cards or lounging in the garden, absorbed in Balzac and Stendhal, and in the evening they sat on the veranda watching the sun sink into the Aegean or listening to the cries of seagulls over the bay. Leman told Cocotte how much she loved and missed Shefikat, how her aunt had been obsessed with science and the French Revolution, and how her republican fervour was only matched by her profound antipathy for Gustav, a German businessman to whom she had been promised.

They discovered a shared love for “Flesh and the Devil” and often on Saturday evenings they would venture to the Alcazar cinema, once the location of the Hamza Bey Mosque, where they sat in the front row admiring Greta Garbo. Many of the screenings were in Turkish, drawing in Orthodox refugees from Anatolia, where Dafne must be living now, Leman explained, sharing with her cousin the stories of her nanny, the mystery of the death of Ibrahim Pasha, the blue carpet Dafne had waved for months in hope it would unravel in the evening. Then she told Cocotte about Dafne’s divine voice, and the favourite canary *chanson*, which she had last sung in tears before embarking on the steamboat. She wondered what her nanny would say if she knew that God now communicated with people not through telephone cables but with motion pictures.

“Yes”, Cocotte burst into laughter, “and not just any ordinary film, some of them are adult-only!”.

“What does adult-only mean?” Leman asked, prompting her cousin to laugh even harder.

Cocotte’s real name was Shyqyri, but she had changed it into something more European sounding, more “emancipated”, as she put it, though Leman wondered if Cocotte truly understood the meaning of that word. It seemed likely that she had picked it up during her time in the French Lycée where she was sent to study (or pretend to study) until her father decided she must be moved to another school, with an easier mathematics curriculum.

Leman, on the other hand, joined the French Lycée that September, and was the only girl in her class. She had no trouble fitting in: she was used to think of herself as Ibrahim Bey, and the boys considered her as one of their own. The Lycée was one of the first foreign schools established by the Mission Laique, an intellectual institution founded in Paris at the beginning of the century with the aim of promoting French language and culture in various places around the world. The teachers came from Paris and maintained links with both the French ministry of foreign affairs and that of education. "Neither domination, nor assimilation", so they would tell students in school, but only "a sincere faith in the duty of civilisation", a duty which must be implemented in full respect of tradition, with a concerted effort to "elevate" rather than "eliminate" local cultures.

At that time, French was still widely used as a language of the Salonican administration, but a recent law had prohibited Greek citizens from attending foreign-run schools. As a result, the students in the Lycée came exclusively from other groups, mostly Sephardic Jews, the largest community, but also Albanian, Italian, Armenian, and Vlachs. Leman frequented the ones who were more politically active. It was a way for her to continue the conversations she had started with Shefikat, a way to return to the worker's rallies at the White Tower, now with greater awareness of what their speeches meant. With them, she learned to communicate in Ladino, the language of the working class. They distributed leaflets in factories where labour protests were growing, they shouted in demonstrations against the looming monarchist threat, they tried to raise awareness about the dignity of work and the wrong of exploitation, they signed petitions to solve the question of refugees' housing, they organised campaigns to raise awareness on the discrimination against Jewish soldiers in the Greek army, and much more.

"You have to be careful all those Jewish communists don't brainwash you", Cocotte would reproach her. "I can't even say it's for a good cause, since you are yet to fall in love".

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On a cold Sunday morning in the Spring 1932, they had gone for a stroll in the nearby Dönme cemetery where Cocotte's mother lay buried. The woman, who had died in the fire, hailed from a family of converted Jews. They were followers of the mystical rabbi Sabbatai Zevi who in the seventeenth century had journeyed across the Ottoman Empire claiming to be the Messiah, until Sultan Mehmed IV asked him to convert to Islam or face death. They observed the Sabbath and professed loyalty to the spiritual Torah, but they also adopted Muslim attire and celebrated Eid. Cocotte explained how at the time of the population exchange, the Dönmeh were considered Turks and forced to leave Salonica, but although some tried to avoid the expulsion by appealing to their Jewish origins, the request was dismissed on grounds that the Rabbi of Salonica refused to consider them Jews.

"It's all a little complicated", Cocotte was explaining to Leman "but anyway, we were lucky. We sent a request to Athens to stay, and everyone else who had made the same request was ignored, and still sent to Turkey. Except for us, because papa has Albanian roots, and he could appeal to be exempt".

Cocotte’s father had loved his wife deeply: the main reason he had not wanted to leave Salonica was that he could not bear the idea of leaving her grave behind. A few years after her death he had remarried, this time an Albanian woman like him, but had never forgotten his first wife. Cocotte was fond of her stepmother - she was a gentle and devout woman, who would take Cocotte regularly to visit the Dönmeh cemetery, teaching her to care for her mother’s grave, planting flowers, and removing weeds.

“*Deuxième maman*”, she called both *maman*, “is always keen for me to come to *première maman*’s grave. But I don’t know how long she will be here. They’re now saying the Dönmeh are secret Jews”, she confessed at the end of their visit, as they walked past the Jewish cemetery. “There are rumours, the Jewish cemetery will be destroyed”.

“*In loving memory of Miriam, devout mother, staunch comrade*”, Leman read from one of the graves, as she stopped to clean the dew that had formed an icy crust around the photo of someone she knew.

“That’s not a particularly interesting one!”, a familiar voice behind her whispered, and she recognised Doctor Elias’s accent.

“Doctor Elias, *quelle surprise* to see you here!”

“*Mais pas du tout!*”, he replied. “I’m always here on Sundays”.

“What’s wrong with the photo?”, Cocotte asked him. I always liked Miriam’s hairdo. You can see it here too, she looks like a queen. People don’t do their hair up like that anymore”.

“Oh, I didn’t mean the photo is not interesting”, the doctor said. “I meant the inscription, it’s not the kind of thing you can use to show why Jews are not the ones holding back progress”.

“What do you mean?” Leman was perplexed.

For a few months now, Elias clarified, he was involved in a project that tried to save the cemetery from demolition (“so I was right!”, Cocote exclaimed). Greek authorities insisted that since the nearby university infrastructure was too poor to guarantee the scientists’ safety from chemicals’ explosions, new labs were needed. There was intense pressure to expand the existing small campus into the neighbouring cemetery land.

“Listen to this”, he said to Leman, “from the minutes of one of the meetings at the Chamber of Commerce, your father gave it to me”, and, as was his habit, reached for the inside pocket of his jacket to unfold an official document which he read out as evidence.

“*In Asia Minor and Thrace we have abandoned graves upon graves of loved ones and brothers. But respect for graves should not limit progress*”.

“I don’t know if that’s the real reason”, he said pensively. Every week, there were new articles in the Greek press, warning that Jewish community leaders work with foreign journalists to turn Salonica into a Jewish city, and that the smallest skirmishes are brought to the League of Nations out of contempt for the Greek state.

“That’s why I have to come and collect inscriptions, then search the archives, and interview witnesses to present the authorities with evidence that the cemetery deserves cultural protection. It’s not a matter of love, but progress. You see”, he concluded, in his thin, reedy voice, “all week I try to save the living; on Sundays I try to save the dead!”

“Can’t they find land somewhere else?”, Leman asked.

“In theory, yes. But you know what they say. That we’re all selfish. That we don’t love Greece. That we’re not ready to make sacrifices…”

Leman then asked if Doctor Elias had seen her family recently. She had learned to be silent about Shefikat. She sensed that something was being kept away from her, and perhaps she had given up, perhaps she did not want to put pressure, or more likely, she had realised that to retain hope, one needed to let go of certainty.

She learned that Mediha Hanim now never left her room, barely ate, and was increasingly frail. Doctor Elias was not sure she would survive the next winter. In his unfailing optimism, he asserted that given what she had been through, perhaps it would be all for the best.

“The leeches are gone too”, he said, “your *grandmère* has no more use for them, and the canaries had to be temporarily removed since she now finds their singing unbearable”. As to Gustav Heym, he showed up less, but the business plans were going ahead. He had sent a large sum of money after the “incident” with Shefikat, and he would soon accompany Avni Bey to Albania to finalise the paperwork.

Leman noticed how when Gustav’s name came up, Doctor Elias accompanied his words with a strange grimace.

“You don’t like him, do you?”, she asked.

“He lacks empathy”.

“Perhaps he doesn’t know how to express it. They’re not like us, we even hug stones”.

Elias shook his head. “No, no, he is simply incapable of it. He can’t see the world from someone else’s perspective”.

He recounted how the two men had met by chance in the lobby of the Hotel Mediterranean a few days after an attack on one of the Jewish neighbourhoods. The settlement, located in Camp David, an abandoned British military camp, had been set on fire following calls by the Greek national student association to boycott Jewish businesses, blaming their representatives for the economic struggles of the city’s poor.

“Do you know what he told me after those Jewish houses were burnt?”

Leman shrugged.

“That it was to be expected”.

Cocotte, who up to that point had been looking at her nails, suddenly looked up in horror.

“Burning people’s houses?”, she asked. “To be expected? Well, perhaps where he comes from…”

“Two men died, one Greek, one Jewish”, Doctor Elias continued. “And this man, this Herr Gustav, had the guts to tell me that since Salonica is full of communists and rebels, as a doctor and as a Jew I have the responsibility to take a stance. And I must say, your father, Avni Bey, was also very disappointing”.

“How?” Leman was embarrassed.

“He tried to defend him. He says it’s because he has this obsession with communists. Apparently, when they first met, he was going on about the Bolshevik threat…That’s why he liked the idea of business in Albania, because there are no Bolsheviks there. I don’t like the Bolsheviks either, but what’s that got to do with the fire, and with Jewish people?”

“What about us?”, Cocotte interrupted. “What does he say about the Dönmeh?”

“I don’t think he’s aware of the difference”.

Leman laughed.

“He needs to come to my school so he can learn about all the different types of Jews, and how they dislike each other just as much as he seems to dislike them…”.

Doctor Elias laughed too. “Are you enjoying school?”, he changed the topic.

“Yes, because everyone seems to complain about it”, she said.

“Shefikat told me that when everyone complains about you, you must be doing something right”.

There was another embarrassed eye roll at the mention of her aunt’s name.

“La *letra kon sangre entra*”, he recited an old Ladino proverb, “It takes blood to learn every letter”, that’s what we were told when we were young. And there was always the *kanaka*, the cane to make you learn even faster. Now it’s all different”, he turned to Leman, “they teach differently. You are very lucky. You will learn about the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and all the great French writers who defended reason and progress…. Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu… humanity no longer needs canes”.

He pronounced the last three names emphatically and with a thick Ladino accent, and for a moment Leman pictured Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau as Flamenco dancers, wearing wigs and twirling on stage, their feet tapping the floor with percussive precision, accompanied by the rhythmic clapping of castanets. She thought about Doctor Elias’s words, then about her lessons with Shefikat. “Humanity might be past canes, but it still needed the guillotines…”, she recalled her aunt’s words.

Doctor Elias smiled. “Oh, but that’s different”.

Leman became pensive.

“Do you think we can be trusted, even if we’re not quite considered Greeks?” she asked. “What does it even mean to be a good citizen?”

Cocotte sighed. “I don’t care”, she said. “I’m worried about those graves. As far as I am concerned, a good citizen is someone who doesn’t try to mess with

the dead”.

“Mademoiselle Leman, you specialise in complicating things!”, Elias said. “You don’t have to think of yourself as only being from one place. It’s a richness after all. The French are obsessed with their *patrie* but we are lucky to have so many. Just like one can have many children and love them all the same, one can also love many countries, many peoples. It’s a blessing, not a curse”.

“I have to write an essay for school”, she said. “Every month we are asked to answer the same question: what makes a good citizen? I don’t know what to write…”.

“And you worry about that?”, he burst out laughing. “It’s not difficult at all! A good citizen is a good human”.

He thought for a moment. “We are lucky to live in *Salonique la Magnifique*, where as your grandmother used to say, the sea sparkles like the soul of its inhabitants. It’s one of the most beautiful, generous cities in the world. We have some problems now, because of the crisis, and people become impatient, and lose faith. But it will be resolved, we’ll sort it out just as we have done it in the past, and we will all learn from our mistakes”.

Leman nodded along, but there was something troubled in her expression.

“Don’t look so sad”, he insisted. “We each pray to our Gods, and whichever God it is, aren’t we all taught to be good people, to love each other, to honour the dead?”, he continued.

The answer seemed to upset her even more.

“What’s up?”, he said.

“Look there”, she pointed to one of the stones further away. “There, just to the left of Miriam’s grave, one row behind”.

“Oh, I can’t see that far”, he said, “I don’t have my glasses. Voltaire joked that we have noses so that we can wear glasses… but I don’t have mine with me… perhaps it is all for the best… I can see there is another inscription. What does it say?”

Leman thought for a moment, wondering if she should repeat what she’d read. Then she looked him straight in the eye.

“It says: *Jews are dogs*”.

7

The Albanian

Leman was finally able to return to the family villa on a mild May afternoon, like the one when Shefikat's wedding had suddenly turned into her funeral. As she walked the streets of the neighbourhood where she had grown up, the echo of Mediha Hanim's wailing, the memory of her own tears of despair returned to her with the same violence she had experienced on the day she was forced out of her house.

A different person had left that place nearly a year ago: a little girl, curious and talkative, who looked after the canaries and filled the house with singing and laughter, and who sometimes dreamt of visiting the monks on Mount Athos.

She had returned completely transformed: a tall and slender young woman, with short dark hair cut like a boy, and lively brown eyes that pierced everything they saw, as if they tried to strip all objects of their appearance, trying to reveal their inner essence. She was accompanied by Cocotte's father but insisted on carrying her own suitcase, which she set down by the entrance to the house, looking suspiciously around, as if she weren't certain that she had reached her destination.

Her grandmother had passed away several months after Shefikat's poisoning, while Leman was still living with Cocotte. At first her parents kept the news secret from her. At the end of spring, several weeks after the funeral, Avni Bey picked his daughter up at the end of school and informed her of Mediha Hanim's death. There was no grief in his voice, instead there was relief, as if he had been eagerly anticipating the day he would be able to share the (“surely welcome?”, he said) news that Leman was now able to return home.

“When did it happen? How? Why didn’t you tell me?”, she muttered in shock, fully aware that instead of answering, her father would repeat the same sentences she had heard before: how Mediha Hanim had languished in bed for too long to wish on anyone, how immediately after her daughter’s “incident” (he had never explained what the ‘incident’ was) she rejected all food, and how she no longer wanted to see anyone. And, in the last few weeks, instead of sleeping, she had spent the night awake calling Shefikat’s name, and most of the time she was delirious.

Doctor Elias visited her every day, not so much with the aim of curing her in this world, he had said, as of speeding up her departure to the other. Even Leman would have barely recognized her grandmother in the final months. Avni Bey looked at her with the same expression of resignation with which he closed his accounting books at the end of the working day.

“The Doctor is right, it’s much better this way”, he repeated, in a voice that implored her not to burden him further. “Your mother is looking forward to having you back”.

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She settled quickly back home, but in the same way one settles in a remote mountain sanatorium, where returning patients recognise each other but prefer not to acknowledge it, exceeding in politeness, defaulting in intimacy. Everything was different. Even the eyes of Ibrahim Pasha in the large portrait hanging in the drawing room, once calm, reassuring and authoritative, had taken on a different look. There was something angry in them, as if he resented having been left hanging on the wall when everything familiar had disappeared. And there was something needy too, as if he begged to die a second time, now unambiguously, in a form that everyone would finally be able to recognise.

After the first few months, conversations with her parents convinced her that wherever her aunt was, the two would never meet again. Around the same time, she also made the decision to no longer mention her name at the dinner table. She called it a "decision," though it was likely little more than the inevitable consequence of nights spent awake, with questions roaming her mind like sentinels on watch - questions that the little girl she had known in the past had no means of answering, and the young woman she had become had no desire to.

In July 1936, Leman finished school, excelling in the final exams, and obtaining a gold medal. The family organised a large dinner to celebrate, where a few friends were invited, some Leman's, some her parents', in that typical mix of generations everyone resents at first, then cherishes after a few drinks. Gustav was invited too, and he was assigned a place next to Leman. He arrived slightly late, finding her and Cocotte already seated and smoking, engaged in an animated conversation with Doctor Elias. He tried a few times to join them, but the doctor seemed to become increasingly agitated. Eventually, after a few aborted attempts, Elias pushed Gustav's chair slightly, stood up, picked up his hat in a hurry, and gave a small ceremonial farewell bow.

“I’m sorry, it’s late, I forgot I have another very urgent appointment about the cemetery”, he said turning towards Avni Bey. “It’s such a beautiful evening”, he added half-apologetically, as he usually did just before parting, regardless of what kind of evening it was.

Leman stood up and accompanied the doctor outside. On the way out, she could overhear Gustav ask Avni Bey about when exactly his daughter had taken up smoking.

“Oh, it’s been a while”, he said with a shrug, following her out with his eyes and giving her a complicit smile.

By that time, she was already a chain smoker. It was one of the things she’d picked up in the political meetings she would tag along to, just as she had picked up reading El Avante and El Jiovenno, the radical leftist newspapers written in Ladino, which she now practiced instead of French. A family friend had spotted her during a dinner in a taverna, and informed Avni Bey, who had remained calm, and replied that knowing his daughter, nothing could be done. For a while, he had pretended not to know, and she had continued to smoke in secret, convinced that if he’d found out, the repercussions would be serious. One evening, however, during a soiree much like this one, her father had suddenly entered the room in which she had retired to smoke with her friends. Instinctively, she’d hid behind her back the hand holding the cigarette, and he had offered her another. She had looked at him perplexed for a few seconds, then reached out for the new cigarette. He had helped her light it. That was the first time in her life she smoked two cigarettes at once, and it was the last time she deliberately tried to mislead. She remembered it with a smile, looking at their German guest, thinking that guilt was the most effective sanction.

When she returned to the room, she found Gustav waving his arms, engrossed in an argument with Avni Bey.

“It is very dangerous”, he was saying, “not only the Bolshevik’s influence on politics but on customs, in fact most of all customs… and culture. Their contempt for authority, and the way they inspire the young to disrespect their fathers and mothers. If I were you, I would not take smoking so lightly…”

Avni Bey tried to reassure him. “Oh, it’s nothing to do with the Bolsheviks”, he said. “It’s just the young, we have all been young. She works very hard, she was the only girl to finish school, and she came first in the whole Lycée. May I offer you a cognac? Perhaps Leman would like one too?”, he winked at his daughter, noticing she had now returned by his side.

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Gustav had started again to visit the house only after the death of Mediha Hanim. At first, his visits were sporadic, then became more frequent. It was as though the old woman’s passing had freed him from the reluctance to behave as if this was his house too, as if he had the same right to participate in its life as in the tobacco company that he and Avni Bey had founded in Albania. He entered without knocking, slipping into the drawing room like a shadow, bringing with him some souvenir Greek refugees had sold him on Sabri Pasha market at four times the usual price. He had the same self-satisfied expression Leman remembered from that first time they had met, when she and Shefikat were learning about the French revolution and reading Madame de Stael, and she now resented his presence just as much as her aunt did back then.

By the time Leman was finishing the Lycée, Gustav had already joined the German National Socialist party, not because he identified with all its aims but because he appreciated the action to remove unfair Jewish competition in business. Of course, one could be carried away by rhetoric and go a little far sometimes, he was the first to acknowledge it. Yet, people should be trusted to correct their own mistakes - he cited as an example the fact that in the runup to the 1936 Olympics, *der Führer* had ordered the removal of all signs saying “Jews are not wanted”, he agreed it was unnecessary to go that far. At the same time, his obsession with the Bolsheviks and their alleged corruption of the young had intensified. He supported Metaxas in Greece, Mussolini in Italy and King Zog in Albania, grateful that in all the countries where his business flourished, there were strong, decent leaders, willing to stand up and say “enough is enough” to the ongoing perversion of customs in a plain way that everyone could understand. People are tired of power games, he would say; they are sick of words like elections, democracy, checks and balances, “it’s all *Lug und Trug*”, all smoke and mirrors, all fluff.

“Have you made up your mind about what you are going to do now that school is finished?”, he asked Leman, once she was settled back at the table.

Leman shrugged.

She had just returned from one of the last sessions of the stenography course she had been attending that summer. She’d been planning to write to some relatives in Paris to enquire about the possibility of staying with them while enrolling at a university to study economics. But relations between her father and that family had become increasingly strained after property disputes, and she kept postponing writing the letter for fear of confronting Avni Bey.

She knew she wanted to leave Salonica but had not quite decided where to go. Wherever she found herself, she felt different. In school, her teachers called her “the Albanian”, but she had trouble picturing what that meant. It was nothing she recognised, just a label others had decided to give her. She had never travelled to Albania. Would they understand her words, her expressions? Would they laugh at her jokes? Or would she have a strange accent, that someone would mock, like Doctor Elias when he spoke French? She was taught to love her homeland, but which one? Was it an idea in her head, or a place in the world?

She observed everything, judged everything. But she spoke little and smiled rarely. Sometimes, after finishing her school work, she would go into the kitchen and offer to help her mother, who occasionally tried to break her daughters’ long silences with reminiscences of their life when her grandmother and Shefikat were still around, recalling how her aunt enjoyed Viennese cakes, for example, or how Mediha Hanim lounged on the veranda, lining up leeches on her stomach, listening to the canaries sing. At that point Leman usually invented an excuse to leave.

She remembered the words of Cocotte’s favourite Ladino folk song: “Dia de shabbat, la tarde, la horica dando dos, fuego saliò al Agua Mueva, a la Torre Blanca se quedò” (“Day of shabbat, in the afternoon, when the clock struck two, a fire broke out at New Water and spread to the White Tower”). Cocotte would often sing it immediately after she woke up from her sleep, sitting on a chair in front of the mirror removing her hair curlers or applying a fruit mask to her face, as a kind of hymn to the new day. But in Cocotte’s voice, the languid notes of the tragic chorus (Dio del cielo, dio del cielo / no topates que hacer - God of the heavens, heavenly God / couldn’t you find anything else to do to us?) were belted out as if the song did not depict the destruction and loss caused by a fire in which she herself barely survived, but a heroic episode of resistance and renewal, interpreted not as the painful, melancholic song that it was but a military march needed to prime the soldiers for battle.

And now all of Europe threatened to become like Salonica. “The flames of war will soon spread everywhere,” warned El Avante and El Jiovenno, which she discussed with her friends. Many of them were older boys who belonged to the city’s wealthy middle classes and rebelled against their apolitical parents by declaring themselves socialists. She listened carefully to the arguments of those who championed returning to Jerusalem so they could finally return home and live in dignity, of those who claimed that home was in Salonica, and of those who argued that Jerusalem was an ideal in any case, since everywhere there was a crisis, and for as long as capitalism remained in place, societies would remain divided. She followed the debates between Zionists, assimilationists, and socialists, not because she fully understood the answers but because she felt the power of the question, the same question she had asked herself since she was a child: “what am I?”

And she often remembered Doctor Elias’s answer during their encounter in the cemetery with Cocotte: it’s very simple, he had said, we are all human. But she remained suspicious. So what, she thought. There are different ways of being human, and different ways to live with others. If that one sentence settled everything, why was there so much evil in the world?

She could not tolerate injustice: she suffered at the sight of the pale, worn-out faces of the young girls who worked in the tobacco factories where she distributed leaflets with her friends. She admired the conviction of her comrades who promised them a more just world. But she also felt a strange discomfort: who was she to tell these girls what to believe in? There were times when she felt she could identify with their anger, others in which she felt embarrassed at her privilege. Theirs were truly difficult lives; she simply felt unhappy. What right did she have to happiness? Was it even possible to separate the pursuit of one’s own happiness from that of others?

At night, she sat on her bed and wrote a diary in which she recorded her experiences, relived the dialogues she had heard during the day, outlined the different arguments, sometimes methodically dividing the page in half, and making lists that summarised pros and cons. But at the bottom of the page there was often a single sentence, underlined in ballpoint pen several times: *can’t make up my mind*.

Although they no longer lived in the same house, Leman still saw Cocotte often. The hours spent with her were the only happy times she would later remember from this period She enjoyed her stories, and felt relieved that when Cocotte spoke, Leman was able to simply listen, unburdened by her own thoughts. Sometimes she was amused, other times perplexed by her cousin's sense of priority: Cocotte would report like some kind of unmitigated disaster the rise of shampoo prices or the difficulty of obtaining import creams from Paris, but seemed completely unperturbed when something genuinely sad occurred, such as when her boyfriend Rexhep, or as they called him in French, Rémy, moved with his family to Albania unexpectedly without even telling Cocotte. She shared the news with Leman followed by a simple shrug, as if this were exactly the kind of thing one must expect life to be made of.

"Well, he didn't want to make me sad", she said. "He was being a gentleman. He's never been to Albania", she explained, "but he won't stand out like here, it's home for them, like it might be home for us, you never know".

"Aren't you going to miss him?".

"You think too much!", Cocotte burst out laughing. Then she rearranged the hem of her dress.

"Maybe I'll see him one day. We could also go to Albania, why not? The creams might be cheaper, and the boys more handsome!".

Leman stared at her, both astonished and frightened by the ease with which she fell in love with boys, then quickly forgot them, like the artifacts of a mediocre provincial museum. She herself found the thought of falling in love terrifying. She feared becoming dependent then disillusioned, and imagined being in love as equivalent to practising some kind of extreme winter sport, like descending a slope on a pair of skis at top speed, unable to stop. The fact that she had decided at one point that no boy could possibly interest her, no person of the opposite sex would ever be worthy of her attention, made it easy to communicate. There were no alien codes to crack, no interpretation of intentions required. Their world held no mystery because she had no need for further knowledge, and she had no trouble being accepted because she never tried to fit in.

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“Herr Gustav”, Avni Bey suddenly turned to their guest some time toward the end of the evening, “I have never asked, what kind of man was your father? Did he have your nose for business?”.

“My father”, Gustav replied, “my father loved death the way us normal people love life, isn’t that extraordinary? He left much pain behind, of course he did. And yet, and yet… to be able to create your own destruction, isn’t that poetry? A tragic end, of course, but what a beautiful one. Only superior characters are capable of it”.

Then suddenly, as if he remembered something accidentally, he turned to Leman, a small red patch forming on his bald head. “Your aunt Shefikat”, he said to her, “was a superior being too, unlike anyone else I met”.

Over the course of his visits, Gustav had never spoken of Shefikat. Upon hearing her aunt’s name, Leman turned pale - it was as if she’d finally grasped the real meaning of Shefikat’s absence. When she recalled this conversation many years later, she was convinced that it explained the decision she announced at the end of that evening, a decision that would change the course of her life, and without which I would not be here, writing these lines.

“You were very fond of her, weren’t you?”, Gustav continued, without noticing how she was now shaking.

“And you look increasingly like her. I don’t mean physically. You’re very serious too, *Mademoiselle*, just like her”.

She muttered something, a sentence she could not finish because she suddenly noticed his cold hand caressing her naked knee under the table. She wanted to scream but no words would come out. Pulling the chair back, startled, she stood up, and went to look for another cigarette. She thought about the scorn that Shefikat reserved for that man, how he never dared to go close to her, how she mocked him in all the subtle ways he never noticed, or noticed and pretended not to, perhaps because he knew that’s what it took to win her over, or simply to win, regardless of her. And for the first time, now that she finally grasped what had happened to Shefikat, she wondered who had really prevailed in the silent struggle between them: she who had left everything behind heroically, poetically, or he who was still there, still lurking, his hands still on everything that mattered. “When a room is full of smoke…”, she thought again. And wondered why Shefikat had only ever thought about total exit, exit from life itself. There must be other rooms, surely, surely, she thought.

Gustav offered to light her cigarette. She shook her head angrily.

“Good idea. It’s not healthy”, he pointed out with scorn. ”But we still have to sell it”. He smirked and turned to Avni Bey. “Now that she has finished school, it’s time to find *Mademoiselle* a husband”, he said, “someone who can look after her, and make sure she would have a comfortable life, and as many cigarettes as she likes - or doesn’t”.

“My daughter? A husband?”, Avni Bey burst out laughing. “She’s gifted in maths”, he said. “She wants to study economics at university, perhaps in Paris”.

“And you will give her money for that?”, Gustav’s face was contorted in disgust. “For however many years it takes to finish her degree? For those French Bolsheviks to indoctrinate her with Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité’?”

Leman stood up, picking up the cigarette she had left to one side, and lighting it with a trembling hand.

“I don’t need money”, she said. “I’ll work. But not in Salonica. I’m going to Albania.”

PART 2

PROLOGUE

THE GREEK

On the façade of the building that has by now become familiar, two words are written in gigantic capital letters: “Files Authority”.

I always imagined my visits to “the office”, like the inspection of an abandoned battle scene: a harrowing, dark labyrinth smelling of death and mould, sifting through piles of paper scattered on concrete floors like so many bodies waiting to be buried. Or like a frozen pit, a descent into Dante’s ninth circle of hell, where the ultimate sinners — those who betrayed their family, their friends, their country and ultimately humanity — are punished. Surely this is where the old communist spies also belong, for turning the trust placed in them into a cogwheel of the secret police’s ruthless machinery.

In Dante’s *Inferno*, the ninth circle of hell is cold, silent and motionless. Cold, to symbolise the cruelty of those whose hearts never knew feelings of warmth or empathy. Motionless, because only love is an active feeling; deception — like evil — has no positive existence, it’s pure absence. Silent, to symbolise the limits of speech, the suicide of language when words serve to destroy rather than communicate.

But instead of Dante’s frozen pit, I find myself in a space that looks like a crossover between an Ikea showroom and a hospital waiting hall. The symmetry of the furniture reminds me of the austerity of lines in a Mondrian artwork. The tiles are grey and shiny, and the white walls have been freshly repainted. A few employees wearing crisp white aprons that look like surgeon's uniforms greet me as I enter. They are increasingly friendly towards me, but I remain deferential. After all, only they are allowed in the basement where the original files are kept. The fact that authorisation is only granted to pairs (so they can monitor each other and ensure nobody manipulates or interferes with the original files) does nothing to make me view their role as any less important. The state may not trust them, of course, but why trust the state, instead?

On page 6 of Investigative File 531 the strange word — Greek — keeps recurring. "Leman Ypi, born in Salonica, of Greek citizenship". A series of handwritten instructions also appear: "Check if someone with this name and Greek citizenship is registered in File Collection I and File Collection II". Followed by another handwritten note: "There is nothing here", with "here" underlined in pencil, and signed Vice-colonel DB.

Citizenship: *Greek*. Greek citizenship, I repeat to myself, then scroll back to the first page with the doodle where the word "Greek" has been written separately under the parallelepiped and followed by "proposal to categorise as 2B".

It's bizarre to think of my grandmother as "Greek". She spoke French to me most of the time, and although I knew she was born in Salonica, I hardly thought of Salonica as a place, let alone as a Greek city. She always referred to it as *Salonique la Magnifique*, but S*alonique la Magnifique* has always been for me a site of the mind rather than a geographic location – not space but time, a time lost before I could know it. Or a gallery of mental images: the painting of a stern old man with deep blue eyes wearing a red fez, a handwoven carpet, faded photographs in black and white capturing people I did not know, and whose casual resemblances to people I did know were pointed out. “He’s a straight talker like Ibrahim Pasha” or “she has the Circassian eyes of Mediha Hanim” or, for something more elevated, “she’s a big reader like Shefikat”. Most of the time *Salonique la Magnifique* was a combination of sounds – from French, Ottoman Turkish, Albanian, Ladino, Italian — and yes, Greek, but only in small part.

It’s hard for me to associate the word “Greek” with my grandmother. Instead, my mind wanders to my first exam at university in Rome, and the wobbly chair on which I was sitting then too, staring at the open page of *Metaphysics* Book Zeta, struggling with the question. “*Signorina*, can you remember what Aristotle’s term for essence in Greek is?” And then again: “The essence of an entity is what makes that entity be what it is, but how does Aristotle define it exactly?”

An embarrassing silence follows.

“Come on, *signorina*, the Greek term for essence is *to ti en einai*, “what it is to be”, which must be corrected – the examiner explains — to “what it *was* to be”, since the present tense has crept into latter day translations and misled entire generations of Aristotle’s commentators. I roll my eyes, stare outside the window, and decide to count the tiles on the floor, thinking that if I fail, the worst that can happen is that I will lose my scholarship and return to where I came from. Right, I mutter. It’s important, he insists. Now I wonder where my grandmother would go if she failed her Metaphysics Zeta test.

It turns out that her *to ti en einai* is also in her past. It turns out her essence, her what it is, or was, to be is "Greek".

I continue to scroll down the file, and up again, but at this point my brain has decided to play a trick on me. I am only able to read the sentences where the term "Greek" appears. The rest is entirely unintelligible, it might as well have been written in the language of Aristotle. There it is, at the top of page 7: "On the basis of evidence concerning oppositional activity against the people, and suspicions of being an agent for foreign intelligence services, in particular Greek ones, we propose to categorise as 2B and to prepare a preliminary investigation on citizen Leman Ypi, born in Salonica, of Albanian ethnicity and Greek citizenship".

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"You always speak Greek when you have a secret!"I must have been five or six the first time I uttered those words in anger. It was New Year's Eve and my grandmother's cousin Cocotte, who used to visit us during the winter, had just arrived on the evening train. I was following with great interest one of their animated mysterious conversations in French about *Salonique la Magnifique* when they suddenly switched to Greek. I thought of it as a deliberately hostile act, intended to exclude me, or, even worse, to sabotage my efforts at comprehension, a cruel method to render fully impenetrable a world I had managed to access only through boundless imaginative leaps . "*Mais non ma cherie*" she replied, "we were trying to remember the lyrics of something we used to sing when we were young, it just feels strange to translate it". And she sang it in Greek: "Kanarini mougliko, esi mu pires to mialo" ("sweet canary, I lost my mind for you") and again in Turkish, except that the word for "kanarini", "canary" in Turkish was "bulbuli", the same as nightingale in Albanian, and, instead of threatening, the song felt comforting, like the chirping of birds on a balmy summer evening. I was so enraptured that since then she would sing it every night before I fell asleep.

"Greek", I think. Greek, not like Aristotle, more like "kanarini mougliko". The chair has stopped wobbling, I am no longer shaking. I have enough confidence to concentrate again on the open file on my computer, where another report appears, typeset and signed by Vice Colonel D.B.

"The reason and the material we dispose for a preliminary investigation around the possible categorisation as 2.B",. the Vice Colonel writes, "are the following":

1. *The fact that even though Leman Ypi has been living here a long time, she continues to carry Greek citizenship and is always hoping to be able to return to Greece.*
2. *The fact that even though she has been privately advised to apply for Albanian citizenship, she has*

not only rejected the option but in the presence of the elements she trusts most, she has expressed hatred towards the People's Republic, and the Party in Power. She has also expressed hatred towards the Soviet Union, and indeed towards the whole socialist camp, and on the other hand she has praised life in Greece, and the freedom enjoyed by people there, making comparisons between Greece and Albania.

3. *Based on her contacts with our collaborator "The Tribune", in addition to what has been mentioned above when she expressed her hostility to the People's Power, she has gone even further, raising suspicions that she must be an agent of the Greek intelligence service. To explain this, we can give the following reasons ..."*

I stop reading.

As I move away from my chair, I can hear my teeth chattering from the cold.

"Is there A/C on", I ask, "it's so cold here".

Vera looks at me as if the question was rhetorical, a statement uttered mainly out of a desire to communicate something, anything, simply to fill the room with words. She makes a clicking sound with her tongue.

"It was on this morning", she starts apologetically, "but we turned it off because we've been told we need to save energy now that we're at war". She points toward the roof of a building visible from the window, making a sign with her hand that indicates a rocket about to fall, accompanied by the sound of an explosion.

I must look perplexed.

"Well, we're in NATO", she corrects herself. "Same thing".

I nod, then turn to the serene blue of the computer in front of me. The chills on my spine are gone but I've now started to feel nauseous. It must be the yellow colour of those typeset sheets, or the persistent scrolling on the blue screen, or the fact that I've not had breakfast or the fact that the canaries have disappeared, replaced by Aristotle's Metaphysics Zeta.

"In the presence of the most trusted elements…", I read again, then turn impatiently to the employees in the office.

"Who is the Tribune", I ask. "And what does 2.B mean?"

"Excuse me?", Vera asks.

"There is someone called the Tribune mentioned here who has made allegations that my grandmother was a Greek spy. I'm not sure this file is hers".

It is not that I seriously think any employees will be able to resolve my doubts. It is more that I cannot continue reading on my own, the room is just too cold, too silent, and I feel trapped by all the questions, unable to move, unable to think. I experience a certain disconnect between myself and the character in the file, I don't recognise my grandmother in the descriptions of the woman in the archive or perhaps I am just struggling to accept that it is all happening to her. I doubt, I doubt therefore she is not, I am not. I must help, but don't know how. There are grave allegations against this woman, suspicions have been raised that will have tragic repercussions. Someone called the Tribune, someone she knows and in whom she must have confided, has produced a report, the existence of which she ignores. She must stop speaking to the Tribune, she must stop giving away information that he is most certain to use against her. She trusts the Tribune without knowing that The Tribune is also a "most trusted element" of the state. If only I could tell her. If only I could persuade the Tribune that Leman's words have been misinterpreted, that my grandmother and this woman have nothing to do with each other, perhaps the accusations will be dropped.

I read the paragraph again. Seeing each word feels like swallowing a piece of metal, and by the point I encounter the words "Greek" and "Greece", the air is trapped inside my lungs, as if caught behind bars. My vision blurs, and I can hardly engage with the rest of the message: the separate pieces of metal melt with each other, and all I can see on the computer screen are thick dark lines. Perhaps we only want to find the truths we already know in some form, I think. Perhaps there is no need to find the photos. Perhaps I've already seen them all.

“Who is this Tribune?”, I repeat, this time louder, standing up from the chair.

“It must be an informant’s pseudonym”, Vera says. “We don’t know the real names. If you look carefully in the file, there must be a list”.

I sit again and scroll up until a page appears entitled: “List of Collaborators with Pseudonyms”. It contains only three lines, handwritten in fountain pen, with numbers appended to each of them and a line for “notes” next to each, which has been left empty.

I read the pseudonyms out loud. The informants’ names sound like objects. 1. *The Tribune.* 2. *White Chewing-Gum.* 3. *Wind of March.* The employees laugh. They’re all like that, they say, the pseudonyms of collaborators, one wonders who came up with them.

I don’t find it funny. These three entities are like vindictive Greek gods; they are about to descend on her in the form of a natural catastrophe, a hurricane, or a flood. There’s an emergency - a human being, my grandmother, or not yet my grandmother, needs help, her life will change dramatically. I tap and tap on the computer screen, scrolling up and down the file, increasingly desperate, as if the disaster were unfolding before my eyes. Someone must intervene, we have to find the Tribune, to ask why they are doing this; it must be possible to explain that there’s been a mistake, that my grandmother is most certainly not a Greek spy, that her essence must not become that of a 2.B.

“I can’t remember, did you apply as a family member?”, Vera, who has noticed my distress, asks. She always asks the same question, and I never waver in my answer.

“No, as a researcher”.

“That’s a shame. If you had applied as a family member it would have been free”.

I had my reasons, I want to say. Instead, I nod.

“Moreover, if you file a request for further information as a family member, you can find the real names of the informant. Then you’ll know who was behind the whole thing”.

“Was?” I think. Her essence, her what it was to be? Is it all in the past? I return to the screen and again I am unable to read past the word “Greek”.

“Do you want to know who it was?”, Vera insists. “I can show you how to fill the forms”.

“Not, right now”, I reply. “First, I want to understand what happened”.

8

Dogs’ Ears

“Albanian citizenship?”, the clerk asked, after popping his head out of his office and into the crowded corridor where Leman had spent the morning waiting for a registration certificate.

“Not yet”, she replied slightly guiltily. “I was told that…”

“No problem”, he interrupted, rubbing his hands in excitement, as if her response had proved exactly what he expected. “There are some forms to fill”.

He opened the door fully, but the foul smell that emanated from the office repelled her. She couldn’t place it: dirty feet, forgotten waste, mud? There was something both pungent and aggressive about it, a mix of damp and rotten foot. She noticed a stack of files next to the heavy metallic door, probably needed to hold it open during hot summer days. But the smell was nothing as dignified as moulded paper.

She turned her head away, taking one step back.

The employee noticed her reaction - it was almost as if he had been trained to discern the status of his visitors based on their responses to the smell in his office. He took a more careful look, starting from the white tennis shoes, then her elegant beige, wide-legged trousers, and, finally, the well-ironed light blue shirt, behind which a silver necklace with a small diamond, matching her small diamond earrings, shone timidly. She had worn them reluctantly at first, since she disliked jewellery but it was an eighteenth birthday present, and upon leaving Salonica she had thought it ungrateful to abandon the set in Shefikat's small treasure box, which she had now inherited. Soon after her arrival in Tirana, the first piece of advice she received from her parents was to "watch out for thieves at all levels" and she decided to keep the necklace and earrings on, not so much to defend them from misappropriation as to avoid arguing with her family in case the predictions turned out to be accurate.

She felt observed, and instinctively touched her necklace, then straightened the collar of her shirt.

"There may be a fee too", he said, and she wondered why in this city fees were always announced with a delay, like the winning ticket of a lottery one had entered without knowing. "Let's not worry about it for now. Looks like you can afford it", he added with a complicit smile. The young man who stood in line next to her in the corridor raised his eyes for the first time. He had been leaning against the wall, deeply absorbed in a thick book he struggled to keep fully open. The last sentence seemed to disturb him in the same way the office smell had disturbed her. He looked at the clerk with a stern expression that suggested he might be about to reproach him.

“Your husband can come in too”, the employee added.

Leman didn’t understand at first. Then she turned her head and noticed the young man. He was tall, slim, and elegantly dressed, with a three-piece grey striped suit that reminded her of the outfits her father Avni wore when he returned from Paris. She caught a glimpse of the thick book’s title: *Code Civil Annoté. Editions Dalloz*. Another student on summer break, she thought. Except that he looked old. Or perhaps not old: she gathered he must be only a few years her senior, but there was something in the way he carried himself, his serious, concentrated eyes, his formal clothes, a deep wrinkle in the middle of his forehead that lent him an air of long suffering. She continued to observe him with curiosity, trying to determine his age. Their eyes crossed briefly. He looked down at the grey, mostly broken, tiles on the floor.

She turned to the clerk.

“We’re not related”.

“You’re on your own?” the clerk seemed surprised.

She nodded, vaguely irritated that yet again she had to justify herself. Even after several weeks in Tirana, she struggled to become used to the frequency with which people assumed she ought to be accompanied everywhere, the perplexed reactions when she explained that she rented a room alone near the bazaar, the generous offers of hospitality from relatives as soon as they discovered she had moved to Albania - *by herself*? “Where are your parents? Where is your husband? You don’t even have a fiancé?!” they would exclaim, between disturbed and frightened, as if her unaccompanied status were some kind of contagious disease that could be cured only if caught early. And so invitations poured in for birthday parties and bridge soirees, for tea afternoons or a game of tennis in the newly founded Nallbani club. She joined without enthusiasm, without interest, more out of a self-imposed obligation to socialise, but increasingly resentful. She struggled to admit it to herself, but she felt lonely here. Compared to Salonica, making new friends was more difficult than she imagined. The women of her age viewed her with suspicion, or so she sensed. And only very few men - generally older than her - seemed able to avoid that tedious and relentless verbal obtrusion that her young peers seemed to mistake for flirting.

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She had arrived in Albania just after her eighteenth birthday, more out of a desire to leave Salonica than with the specific aim to settle here, as opposed to anywhere else in the world. Several of her friends from school had left for university - in France, Italy or Austria. Others had *returned* (even if it was their first visit, people insisted on using the term) to Israel with their families. But she did not want to be a burden on her parents. Her father's tobacco business in the south of Albania was increasingly challenged by the financial crisis - it had reached the country with a delay, but the effects were now felt with full force. Prolonged droughts and heat waves had triggered a sharp decline in crops, and many peasants struggled to make a living : they were on the verge of famine. She knew that her father felt responsible, and that he needed to save money to be able to help.

She had also wanted to be independent from her parents. Even without the financial difficulties, continuing to study would have entailed remaining in her father's debt. She preferred to look for work. But why in Albania? The more she reflected on this, the less obvious it seemed. When she first thought about it, still in Salonica, the only answer was the one that now stood out for its absurdity: the name intrigued her. She was fascinated by the disjunction between how the country was called by foreigners (Albania) and how its own people referred to it (Shqipëria), as if a leap of faith was required to fill the gap between the two, to mend the fissure between awareness of oneself and recognition by others. It was not quite the same as her childhood dream of camouflaging as a man to smuggle between the monks of Mount Athos. But perhaps it reflected something of the same attitude: the desire to crack a code, to find out who she was by provisionally turning into someone else. In this abyss between two unknowns, in the odd space between such disparate words, Albania and Shqipëria, she hoped to find the truth about herself.

Now it all seemed rather foolish. She had left Salonica sometime in the middle of August 1936, during a violent summer storm that made the plane shake and rattle like a toy. Suspended in the air, she clutched at the armrests, looked at the mountains from above, and briefly wondered if she had a preference on which side of the border she should perish. She concluded she was indifferent - the border was a recent addition, after all. Upon arrival in Tirana, still feeling unsettled from the journey, she'd gone for a walk, found a bar, ordered a cognac, and lit another cigarette. Two men had come to speak to her, in Italian. Apparently, she was too well-dressed to be a "general woman" - the local's term for prostitute - was she perhaps a tourist? But then how come she wore no hat? All Italian women wore hats, they had said. She pretended not to understand either Italian or French, and since it did not occur to them that she might communicate in Albanian, it was not difficult to part ways.

Cocotte had connected her with some distant relatives who lived in the centre of town, right next to the Yugoslav Legation, one of the two sumptuous buildings in town, the other being the King's residence. She had stayed with them for a few days, until she rented her own place, and began looking for a job. But she soon realised that in late August no office could be expected to provide services. “Nobody works in August”, people said with a regretful sigh, a sigh that acquired a special gravity when the verdict was delivered from employees who, against all odds, were themselves sitting in an office, as if it had remained open by mistake.

Cocotte had also given her the address of several cousins her age, all students abroad, but who were well connected in the administration and might help her find a job. But after her first chance encounters with local men, she had become reluctant to reach out. She preferred to wander aimlessly on her own, roaming the streets of the capital - an overgrown village with aspirations of grandeur, she would later call it. She was perplexed by the seamless integration of interminable strings of mules and donkeys with the occasional Cabriolet, of headscarves and long dark veils with short, died hair that looked like carnival wigs, of mosques and Orthodox churches, of traditional Albanian costumes and tailored suits, of fezzes and *a-la-franca* hats, of exhausted peasants lashing on even more exhausted horses, and elegant women who stopped to admire each other’s suntan, of Chanel perfume and mutton manure. Everything was there, and nothing made sense: spotless, new villas built on filthy, chaotic, roads, muddy bazaars seamlessly integrating neo-classical architecture, endless, loud chatter and quiet gossip, pompous promises of upcoming meetings followed by appointments in which nobody showed up or showed up a week later.

And then there were the few foreigners - diplomats, businesspeople, one or two exotic travellers - who constituted the largest clientele of the newly opened hotels and bars and seemed to have acquired the status of gods. Those were followed by demi-gods, the locals who had once lived abroad but returned, for reasons known only to them but widely celebrated as gestures of selfless sacrifice deserving of unlimited (and always inadequate) gratitude. There was hospitality and kindness but also mistrust and arrogance, there was sharing and solidarity but also servility and open fights, long waits in offices where nothing happened, and inexplicable bursts of activity in which everything happened all at once. She took it all in, hoping that one day she might become used to it. But the truth she struggled to accept was that she had barely arrived before she felt she had given up.

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“Nevermind, you can come in too”, the employee said, urging the young man next to Leman in the corridor to join her inside. ““My name is Sulejman, by the way, like Sulejman the Magnificient. I assume you’re here for the same reason?” It was almost as if he had decided the two looked sufficiently alike that even if they had never met each other, it was a bureaucratic mistake that ought to be rectified.

“I already have citizenship”, he replied. “I need a certificate of residence for the Foreign Ministry exam”.

Sulejman nodded. “I can do that at the same time”, he said industriously. “It will be quicker. But there might be …”.

“A fee”, the man interrupted. “I know”.

He waited for Leman to go first, then followed her inside. The office was cagey with faded grey walls, several damp spots casting shadow in the corners, and crumbling plaster. In the middle of the room there was a disproportionately large table, with a few scattered papers and a grey envelope placed on the top. Behind the desk, a single wooden chair, which even in its unoccupied state looked on the verge of disintegrating. At some distance from the chair, a medium-sized copper tub carrying a smaller plant vase seemed to have been carefully positioned to avoid office visitors trampling on it. Leman had noticed the same layout in other government buildings she had recently visited: officially the tubs served as a base for the decorative plant pots, but their real function, so she had been later told in confidence, was to collect drops of rain dripping from the ceiling.

Then she looked again at the young man, who unlike her, seemed unperturbed by the smell and uninterested in the pot (or the tub, depending on the point of view), and was waiting patiently for the clerk. Eventually she gave up, and cautiously, trying to be discreet, reached out for a handkerchief in her handbag, which she brought to her nose, as if she needed to wipe it.

“It won’t help!”, Sulejman, who had been observing her movements exclaimed. “It’s the dogs. When it comes to the dogs, there is nothing one can do. All one can say is that it’s for a good cause!”.

He pulled from under his desk a small metallic safe, and placed it on the table with an expression of sadistic enjoyment.

“Would you like to see them?”.

"See what?"

"The dogs'", he said. "I have them here", he pointed at the safe, opening the door slightly and bringing out a large paper envelope. The smell became unbearable.

"What is it?", she asked, turning her head away in disgust.

"That's obvious", he replied, waving the envelope to her face, like a harsh teacher. "Moreover, I have just told you. The more pertinent question is why they're here. This you may not know. It's for the inventory. We need to keep a record of how many dogs have been eliminated, so we can issue receipts to whomsoever presents them to demand compensation".

"Receipts?".
"Yes, receipts", he said. "It's the law, you know, the civil code".

She seemed perplexed. To help her understand, he decided to deliver the full lecture, the one he must have given to every new visitor as soon as he noticed the slightest interest or (which was the same from his point of view) the slightest concern with the smell. The mayor's office, he explained, had recently issued a call for bids, offering to pay gold napoleons to anyone offering to eliminate stray dogs. It was part of the King's modernisation efforts, and his concern for his subjects' public health. Perhaps even a request from the Italians, now close allies, he speculated.

"Anyway, it's part of the struggle against the dark forces of reaction", Sulejman continued. First there was the abolition of polygamy, then the abolition of forced marriage before maturity, then the campaign against women's veils. Now is the turn of the dogs".

He spotted the title of the thick book that the man who had joined Leman in the office was carrying under his arm. “We have that one too”, he said. “We have a civil code, we were inspired by the Swiss. Atatürk did the same… he also copied the civil code from the Swiss. We didn’t copy it, we adapted it. You couldn’t possibly argue with Swiss laws could you? They work like Swiss clocks”.

Leman still did not understand, but the mention of Atatürk and King Zog’s shared admiration for the Swiss Civil Code brought a smile to her face. She suddenly remembered Dafne’s obsession with Swiss clocks and Swiss nannies, and her eagerness to model herself after them. She imagined Zog, with his thin moustache, and his partitioned hair, waving the sceptre of the self-declared Kingdom of Albania in a Swiss nanny uniform. No, she told herself. You couldn’t possibly argue with the Swiss nanny state.

“But in this specific case”, the clerk said, as if continuing her train of thought, “the central propulsive force comes not from the Swiss but from the Italians”. He explained that after the Italian government helped create a Bank of Albania (of course with headquarters in Rome but this was only a minor and hopefully temporary bureaucratic technicality), and especially after the creation of the SVEA, the Albanian-Italian association for cooperation and development, Italy was the country’s largest creditor. Rome intended to fund most public works in Tirana; there were ambitious architectural plans to renovate the centre of the city by erecting new buildings for the ministries. Mussolini himself had apparently taken an interest in the works.

Leman turned towards the man who had joined her in the office, as if expecting to hear his view too. When the name of Mussolini was pronounced, the frown on his forehead seemed to become deeper. He looked as if he was about to correct something, but again had second thoughts. He remained silent.

“You can see we need new buildings”, Sulejman continued, pointing at the tub in the middle of the room. “The least help we can offer is to organise the procedure to ensure we eliminate the dogs”. He picked up the envelope and started fiddling with it, passing it from one hand to the other, as if the act of transfer already constituted a step in the right direction.

“Anyone can bid for them, you know”, he continued, showing the envelope. “But there are some technical specifications. They can’t be killed in a cruel way, you have to do it with a hunting gun, then you must disinfect the area using bleach, and you are also responsible for the transport. And this is very important”, he spoke to her, as if she was herself about to embark on a dog hunt, “they must be buried at least three metres deep, and the area around the grave, that too must be disinfected. Then you must present yourself here to supply the evidence”, he concluded with a smirk, “since we register both people, *and* dogs. Dead dogs, in this case”.

He went closer to her, still waving the envelope. She felt nauseous, and slightly irritated that even after the lecture, she had not understood what the unbearable smell was.

“Do you know what I keep mulling over?”, Sulejman mused. “Most of the time the state is nothing, one may wonder why even bother with a new state, like we do. If you really must have a state, you must pay for it, defend it, you must even love it. It’s a lot of hassle. That’s my view anyway. Do you disagree?”, he turned to his other customer, as if he needed the intervention of someone carrying a civil code to confer plausibility to his remarks.

Yet again, the man looked at him reproachfully but remained silent. But he made an impatient gesture with his hand, which in turn seemed to make the clerk angry.

“Why do you do that?”, Sulejman almost shouted, disappointed not to have received the response he expected. “I bet you’re one of these people who keep asking: where is the state? The more one does for the likes of you, the more you ask where the state is. Well, it’s in small things like these. Your name on a certificate, the dogs in the envelope. That’s when we really see the dignity of the state. Most of the time, it’s just a fiction. People wonder what is the state, why do we even have to do what the state tells us to do. Well, little things like these make it real, we know it works for us. We can see it, we can smell it, we can touch it”.

He picked up the dogs’ envelope, slit it open, and tipped its contents onto the table. Leman had expected the usual—a list of numbers, figures, statistics, site locations, and so on. Instead, a cascade of severed dogs’ ears spilled out, distinct in size and color: black, dark brown, yellow, gray. He carefully picked them up, one by one, tracing the contours of each with a caressing touch, every soft hold whispering the fragility and dignity of the state.

“However, we have a huge problem of corruption”, he spoke somberly. “Not everyone takes the law seriously. People just bring ears for the inventory - the dogs are graced, as it were. I have seen them with my own eyes, after dark - a peasant with a knife, caught the dog, removed the ears, and left. He might have even bandaged the animal - certainly some do".

Leman shuddered. Suddenly it dawned on her that the strange creatures she had spotted from her balcony roaming her street late at night, limping and groaning in pain, were not a strange breed of animal, only available in Albania. They were stray dogs, like wounded soldiers in retreat, dragging their hungry bodies in agony, whining pitifully, their suffering eyes like holes pierced in the dark.

“Some people say whoever is found cheating on the dogs’ ears should have their own ears chopped off”, the clerk continued, failing to notice her discomfort. ”The trouble is the animals can’t say who’s done it, they are silent witnesses, they can’t spy on their perpetrators. I must say, I find it difficult. On the one hand, it seems only compassionate to spare them and take the money, the animals have done nothing wrong after all. On the other hand, it defeats the purpose of the inventory. It’s not just cheating on the state; it’s pointless cruelty. It’s no good having good laws if people won’t obey them. Still, it takes time to get used to this civil code… difficult, very difficult”, he repeated. “What would you do *Mademoiselle*?”.

Shaking, Leman instinctively brought her hands to her ears in a protective gesture, feeling the small diamonds of her jewellery set press coolly against her fingertips. The young man in the pinstriped suit had noticed her discomfort and stepped forward.

“How about instead of parading dogs’ ears you hand us those registration certificates?”, he said impatiently. “No wonder the queue is endless out there, if you’re going through this with every citizen”.

“Ooooh, I thought she would be squeamish”, Sulejman confronted him. “It’s you instead. Are you scared of dead dogs’ ears by any chance?”

“I’m not squeamish”, the man replied irritated, “and I’m not scared. I’m just late”.

“Alright, alright”, he said, “She seems more patient. I’ll start with you. What’s your name?”

The young man became calmer.

“Asllan Ypi”.

The employee raised his head from his paper. His face had suddenly turned pale.

“Ypi?”, he murmured. “Ypi as in…?”

“Yes”, the man replied curtly.

“As in… Xhafer Ypi? The former Prime Minister? The Chief Inspector of the Royal Court?” There was now an expression of despair in his eyes, like someone caught in a snare by his superiors.

Without waiting for the reply, he began to collect the dogs’ ears scattered on his desk, and to return them one by one in the envelope, as if he were now trying to remedy the consequences of someone else’s abuse. The excessively polite smile on his face contrasted with his earlier swaggering tone, a smile both hostile and desperately needy.

Still processing the shock of the earlier exchange, Leman wasn’t able to tell Asllan that she too knew who he was, and that she had intended to be in touch with him, bringing greetings from Cocotte. Her cousin had suggested she contact some well-placed relatives, and had mentioned his name, but she had hesitated. She was reluctant to ask for favours, however indispensable they seemed. Later that evening, when she reflected on the encounter, she was perplexed - but also positively surprised - that this young man had been standing in the corridor just like her, that he had not tried to skip the wait by mentioning his surname. She remembered how he'd announced his intention to prepare for a state exam, which in turn ruled out the intention to use his connections. In the few weeks she had been living in the country, she had become so used to exceptions becoming rules, that what she had always thought of as the norm now stood out for its exceptionality.

"Are you… are you cousins?", Sulejman asked, with a last glimmer of hope that this Ypi and the other one, his superior, might not be related. But there was also resignation in his voice: he knew full well that in this small country, for all its modernisation efforts, its civilisational aspirations, and its code of rights, nothing happened by chance, anonymity did not exist, and everyone was related, everyone reported on everyone, and everyone had the potential to ruin everyone else.

"I'm his son".

"His son? Whaaaat? Why didn't you tell me? The son of our Chief Royal Inspector has been waiting in the queue outside without saying a word? Of course, I hope you understand I did not mean to say I did not love the state…. I was joking, it's clear, yes, inshallah… And the dogs, I swear on my children's head, I don't show the dogs to everyone, I don't show them to anyone, and of course I never mention the King’s close relation to Italy, but this lady complained about the smell so I thought I should explain… Why, my son, why did you have to wait so long? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why what?”, Asllan replied, somewhat irritated.

There was an awkward pause, during which the clerk continued to look at him deferentially, helplessly, as if begging for mercy. Asllan thought a little, and eventually took pity on him. He softened his voice. “Uncle”, he called him affectionately. “Didn’t you just tell us about the importance of the Swiss civil code and the dignity of the state?”

Intermezzo: Asllan's Biography

Excerpt from Investigative Judicial File nr. 1384

Death to fascism *Freedom to the people*

Statement made, and signed today, on date thirteenth, sixth, one thousand nine hundred and forty seven in the Directorate of the Prison for the Enemies of the People, in front of me Captain M.S, in the presence of officer N.P. by defendant Asllan Ypi.

I was born in the city of Bitola in the vilayet of Manastir in 1911. I lived there with my family for three years. At the time, my father, Xhafer Ypi, worked in Anatolia as a judge in a civil court. In 1914 the whole family moved to Vodena in Greece as war refugees. We remained there until 1923. My father worked in the Albanian administration, and we lived with an uncle.

I studied at the French Lycée in Korça and graduated in 1933. My father was then Justice Minister and later became Chief Inspector of the Royal Court. At the end of 1933, I went to France to study, first to Lyon then Paris. I graduated after three years and returned to Albania. In the two years that I lived in Paris I published two articles in "The New World" (Bota e Re) about "Lessons from the French Revolution" and "The Economic Crisis".

I returned to Albania in June 1936.

9

Slippers and the General Will

"Albania is beautiful, tormented and boring", Leman declared in response to Asllan's question of how she found the country. She had wanted to say "corrupt" instead of "boring" but changed her mind at the last moment, remembering Shefikat's words that only corrupt people expect corruption in others. She had just introduced herself in relation to their mutual cousin Cocotte, but failed to mention her own initial reluctance to reach out to him. After observing Asllan in the office, the worry she had entertained that he might interpret her contact as a request for pulling strings on her behalf, seemed absurd, ludicrously offensive. The thought would clearly never cross the mind of a man who had spent half a day in a queue he could have avoided with a simple mention of his surname.

They had left behind the two-story villa that hosted the municipal office, and clutching their certificates, strolled along Boulevard Mussolini - a boulevard only in aspiration, since only with a considerable stretch of the imagination would one find the modernising vision of the Italian architects in the heaps of mud, construction material, horse manure, and scattered rubble throughout the site. Two parallel rows of buildings in neoclassical style were designed to host the new ministries and faced each other like beauty contestants awaiting a final touch-up. Separated by a former duck-pond that had now dried up, and a broad alleyway intended to culminate in a sumptuous royal palace, both the pond and the alleyway acted as a natural boundary between the visionary fascist architecture and a wider field of mud settled by hens, geese and pigs. It was clearly a different place from Salonica, the Salonica designed by Charles Hebrard, a copy of something else too, but a dream forged in the fire of 1917, the Salonica of art deco buildings and refugee camps, of street vendors and shopping malls, of plush cinemas and crumbling houses, of international hotels and homeless people, of crying and singing and laughing and cursing in half a dozen languages. There was misery and wealth in Tirana, but misery was flat and wealth did not sparkle, and there was a kind of dullness to both. “Boring”, she thought; “boring” was the word.

“Boring?” Asllan had a habit of responding to everything with a certain delay, as if everything needed to be processed through an internal dialogue first. He walked fast, and she was struggling to keep up. He spoke in the same serious voice with which he had addressed the municipal clerk, and for an instant she thought he slowed down, and stopped to look straight into her eyes. He was genuinely curious, but Leman interpreted his earnest tone, as well as the pause after which he responded, as a polite way of conveying his disagreement. She became nervous, torn between wanting to explain more and wondering if she had an explanation after all. Perhaps Albania was not boring at all. Perhaps she simply did not know how to find it interesting.

“I read it somewhere”, she said, with a certain hesitation, as if trying to persuade herself. “I think in a foreign journalist’s travelogue”. Then, for the second time that morning, she wondered why it mattered what this perfect stranger thought. “I can’t say I disagree”, she added, changing her voice, trying to appear confident.

This last remark seemed to upset him. “Foreigners don’t always understand Albania”, he said after another pause.

This time she noticed a slight tone of reproach. She wanted to reply, but felt paralysed, wondering what right she had to contradict him. He was the local after all - she was still a foreigner of sorts.

“It’s different in your case”, he said gently, as if he’d read her mind. “You’re not a foreigner”. She felt awkward, even a little angry that this man, a perfect stranger, was able to second-guess her. She had also hoped until a few weeks ago, that it might all turn out to be different here, that she might finally be understood.

Nothing had turned out as expected. Now she oscillated between solidarity with all the visitors she encountered roaming the streets asking for directions, and her proximity to people who spoke her language, just enough to turn her into someone able to offer rather than seek assistance. On her last outing in the market, she’d rescued several foreigners despairing at the absence of street signs: an Italian priest, a group of drunken Moravian businessmen who had come to Tirana to sell Bata shoes, three perplexed American missionaries who had been recently kidnapped by brigands in the North then released after being offered grapes, a bedraggled English couple on honeymoon who looked as if they'd landed in the country by mistake. And there was also a loony French language teacher - particularly challenging to help, since only with great reluctance had he admitted to being lost.

She had written to Cocotte later that day joking that if only there were more tourists in Tirana, she could charge a fee to help them return to their residence and would no longer need a job. At least nameless streets really were nameless, unlike the administration for which she had hoped to work. Without contacts, she said, it was as difficult to enter a government building as the monastery of Mount Athos. "Yours with love, still unemployed", she had signed off.

"Don't despair, I'll be there soon", Cocotte had replied a few days after. Her father was also contemplating a move to Albania. Life had become challenging in Salonica, and they planned to sell "Villa Insurrection", to buy a house in Tirana. With the remaining funds from the sale, they would enjoy a comfortable life in the Albanian capital. "I'll find two husbands", Cocotte concluded her letter, "one for you, and one for me. Then maybe you'll stop complaining that you don't have a job. Or if you don't want to, I will find one husband for me, that can help find a job for you. Yours with hope".

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“Do you get recognised often like that by your surname?”, Leman asked, as she and Asllan stood briefly to one side of the street to make way for a group of peasants in traditional costume who were pulling donkeys in the direction of the market.

“Everyone gets recognised here. At least this time I didn’t have to be escorted to the police station”.

“The police station?”
He smiled or tried to, a smile twisted by pain. There was a deep furrow etched on his forehead which gave his face a sad, contorted expression, as if he had been long suffering from a mysterious ailment.

“I was caught distributing socialist leaflets during a protest at the French Lycée”.

“The Prime Minister must have been delighted!”, she joked.

“Xhafer Bey did not work in the administration then”, he replied, taken aback by the fact that she seemed to know exactly who his father was.

Leman was perplexed to hear Asllan refer to his father’s tenure as Prime Minister as his time “in the administration”. At home in Salonica, she had often heard her own father discuss Albanian politics, and mention the old Ypi, praising him for steering Albania’s recognition by the United States at a time in which the country’s survival was at stake.

“If you’re not recognised by the Americans, you don’t exist”, Avni Bey had said. Leman was only six or seven when she first heard this but it had stuck with her because that week she was reading with Shefikat about the discovery of the Americas, and at the end of the day she had drawn a picture of a man on a sailing boat with the caption: “Columbus is recognised by the Americans”, which had made her aunt laugh.

She told all this to Asllan, recalling how, several years later, her father, Avni Bey, had commended Xhafer for leading the first (and so far only) Albanian unity government. “Unsurprisingly”, Avni Bey had explained, “it did not last”.

Her father knew the family well. They came from Starje, a small village in the south of Albania, but in reality - Avni Bey was keen to emphasise their Ottoman roots - they descended from uch-beys, semi-autonomous warriors originally based in the Principality of Karaman, in south central Anatolia. Following the conquest of Constantinople, the Karamanids had been sent by Mehmet the Conqueror to colonise the Balkans, promising the Sultan loyalty in in exchange for land and property.

“They were good fighters”, Avni Bey had explained, “both with the sword and with the pen”. One of their ancestors had negotiated the exchange of prisoners in Romania at the end of the Russian-Turkish war. Another ancestor (or was it the same man? history became murky on this point) had become muttessarrif of Plevlje (in modern day Montenegro) where he skillfully deployed brigands and military troops to contain further Habsburg advances into Ottoman territory.

“But fortune has never been on their side”, Avni Bey had said. And, as if to prove the last point, as well as the fact that the pen could get in you in trouble as much as the sword, he had given the example of two relatives with whom Xhafer Bey had been particularly close. One of them, the founder of one of the first Albanian-language newspapers and a member of the Ottoman parliament, was arrested on charges of sedition, spent a few years in prison, and died from alcoholism in 1912, just months before Albania became independent. A second one, active in the Young Turk movement, who fought tirelessly to defend the country's integrity when it risked being dismembered by the Great Powers, was soon after assassinated following a secret plot by the pro-Italian faction of the Albanian government. Leman sensed that the purpose of these stories was not so much to acquaint her with the fortunes of the Albanian patriotic movement or with the lives of those who had struggled for the dignity of the nation. It was rather to caution her against such a futile endeavour. "That's why I always stuck to trade myself", Avni Bey always said at the end of these conversations. "Countries rise and fall, but money has no master. Inshallah Xhafer Bey will survive".

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"That means our parents must have crossed paths", Leman said, explaining to Asllan her father's habit of referring to politicians as friends, provided he had encountered them in the flesh at least once.

Asllan became pensive. He still used the formal "ju" rather than "ti", or "vous" instead of "tu", when he addressed Xhafer Bey, both in Albanian and in French. It was strange to hear that this man in Salonica, whom he had never met before, could nurture feelings of sympathy, perhaps even affection, towards Xhafer Bey.

Asllan had never felt close to his father. He was born in Manastir, or the city of consuls, as it was called, on account of the many foreign diplomats posted there. Nestled on the feet of the Baba mountain, bustling with bazaars and Turkish baths, Manastir was one the most important routes connecting the Adriatic to Central Europe as well as the site of the congress of Manastir, the first nation-wide meeting of Albanian intellectuals to have lobbied the Porte for the recognition of a unified language with the Latin alphabet. The event was held in the yellow three-storied house of Asllan's uncle; in the congress his father, Xhafer, represented the adjacent city of Konitsa, where he worked as a judge in an Ottoman court.

Yet Asllan had no memory of the glorious days of Manastir. He had come into the world in late 1911, only a few weeks after the penultimate Sultan crossed the city on an imperial tour that included Salonica, officially to be introduced to his European subjects but - as it turned out - to part with them forever. Within a few months, the Balkan Wars started, and the Ottoman Empire lost almost all its European territories, including Albania. Manastir was invaded by Serbian and Bulgarian forces, renamed Bitola, and annexed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Asllan vaguely remembered being accompanied to Greece by Xhafer Bey, he remembered the large pomegranate tree in the courtyard of his relatives where a swing had been installed *apostafat* (or specifically) for him: that was all that mattered at the time. And he remembered promising his father that he would look after his younger brother, and his pregnant mother, even though he was only four or five. Xhafer, on the other hand, returned to Albania where he became increasingly active in national politics: first as leader of the Popular party, a conservative political force supported mainly by the country's landowning elite, then plotting in exile against the short-lived democratic revolution of 1924, and finally back to Albania where he occupied several ministerial positions before becoming chief inspector of the royal court. He was reserved, often quietly grumpy, and had a self-effacing character that could be mistaken for mediocrity, a perception he did nothing to correct since he had become convinced that, contrary to popular belief, the key to lasting authority was to avoid giving the impression of excessive charisma.

There was only one trait of his character that contrasted with the image Xhafer had built for himself, a feature that Asllan had also inherited: both father and son had a habit of walking fast, too fast, so fast that whoever tried to walk alongside him struggled to keep up. In the case of Asllan it was perfectly innocuous, and in the case of Xhafer it had been innocuous until 1927 - the year Albania became a monarchy, when Xhafer joined the court, and sometimes forgot that his former interior minister Ahmet Zogolli had now become King Zog of the Albanians, and it was no longer appropriate to walk ahead of him. Very often, during royal functions, Xhafer would catch himself rushing ahead of his majesty, barely noticing that the king struggled to keep up until, from a distance, one or another of his colleagues would start vigorously shaking their head, or gesturing desperately, or making strange signs with their index finger until he finally understood. At that point, he slowed down, rearranged his top hat, and whispered to himself: *tempus fugit*.

It wasn't just in the fast walking that Asllan resembled his father. Like the old Ypi, he was quiet, serious, reluctant to engage in small talk, and just as interested in politics. This annoyed him, and it annoyed him even more when others pointed it out. His rare meetings with the father often ended up in bitter political confrontation. He felt shaken after each of them, disturbed not so much by the fact of disagreement as by the circumstances in which it always seemed to emerge. They shared the same principles, they almost always started from the same premises, but seemed to reach opposite conclusions. They both cared about the nation's dignity, but could Italy help? They both wanted freedom, but with King Zog? As to justice, how would one even know what it meant without full democracy?

"My father is a good man", Asllan said, more to himself. "Only, he loves tradition. For him traditions are like old slippers. You wake up in the morning, find them under your bed, and wear them everyday, for as long as they last. And when they wear out, you don't think about them, you simply replace them with an identical pair".

She smiled. "My father is the same", she said. "But his Ottoman slippers are lost, and it's not clear they can be replaced".

They had approached cafe Flora, a recently opened patisserie with tables and chairs positioned to evoke the famous Parisian brasserie, and enveloped in a cloud of smoke just like its French namesake. Its initial aspiration to be a centre where artists and intellectuals would gather to debate the latest social issues had quickly given way to a reputation for being the capital’s prime venue for political gossip. Asllan looked at his watch.

“I wanted to ask you about the foreign ministry exam I heard you mention earlier”, Leman asked. “I have no idea how to go about preparing for it, and if they even take it seriously. Do you have time for a coffee?”

“Coffee?”, he seemed taken by surprise. “Not today. I’m late with my thesis. If I don’t finish writing soon, I won’t be able to graduate“.”

“What is your thesis about?”

“About the relation between the general will and the will of all in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*”.

“Are you a philosopher?”

“No”, he said with his usual delay. “A lawyer. Or rather, an aspiring lawyer”.

There was a short pause during which they stood before the cafe entrance, and he explained that he had returned from Paris earlier that month. Officially still enrolled in Law at the Sorbonne, he had finished all his exams but found it impossible to concentrate on the dissertation. He rented a room with a fellow-Albanian student on Rue Cujas, close to Boulevard Saint Michel, where there were daily protests, tear gas, strikes, picket lines, occupation of university halls. He had especially struggled with one of his last assignments, the exam in fiscal law, because of protests involving the professor responsible, one Gaston Jeze who had acted as legal advisor to Ethiopia, defending it in the League of Nations from Mussolini’s invasion. Jeze’s stance had triggered a severe diplomatic reaction on the side of the Italian delegation, and provoked uproar in the university. French far right student activists connected to Italian fascist movements, accused Jeze of dragging the two countries to war, and demanded his resignation. As Asllan sat in the lecture hall, ready to take notes in fiscal law, there was shouting, whistling and fighting in the corridors, and projectiles were thrown at the lectern to the cry of "Jeze must go".

"Sounds like I should have gone to study in Paris", Leman joked. "There's definitely more happening there than in Albania".

"This was just the beginning".

He told her how he had joined the Socialist Party soon after his arrival in France. He was actively involved in campaigning for the Popular Front in the upcoming elections. On the streets, there were regular clashes with students from monarchist and conservative organisations who blamed foreigners for the unemployment the country experienced after the Great Depression, and who demanded the exclusion of immigrants from access to certain professions, especially the legal and medical ones. The Fifth Arrondissement was incandescent. But even when things seemed to settle, with the victory of the Popular Front in the recent May elections, the atmosphere became, if anything, even less conducive to studying. The mood shifted from angry protest to jubilant celebration, left-wing newspapers were now sold in every street and the union of socialist students had its own office in the Latin Quarter. Communists and socialists celebrated the power of their antifascist coalition, with loud singing in every corner, drinks flowing freely, shouts and laughter filling the streets until the early morning hours.

“I was never going to finish if I stayed. Here, it’s been a little better. But I still need to wrap up in the next few days.”

“Perhaps we can meet another time then?”

She had started to become curious, and the fact that he seemed completely indifferent made her even more keen to know him better.

“Do you like Rousseau?”, he asked.

“Is that the condition for having coffee?”

He delayed his answer as usual, and she thought he did not hear.

“I don’t know too much about Rousseau. Just what we were taught in the Lycée. The general will, the will of all, that sort of thing. I’d like to read your thesis”, she hastened to add.

He blushed. “I would like to translate some parts into Albanian, I’d like to publish it somewhere, perhaps in the *New World*. But I am not sure what works… perhaps it is also… well… boring as that foreign journalist wrote. If you are willing to take a look…”

“Dear Cocotte”, Leman penned in a letter that evening. “I seem to have met the only Albanian man who is utterly disinterested in coffee. That cousin you had once mentioned, Asllan Ypi. He’s a lawyer - or rather an aspiring lawyer. He studies the general will. Do you know what the general will is? I am hoping to find out more”.

Intermezzo: Lessons from History

Asllan Ypi, “Lessons from History”, Bota e Re (New World) vol. 1, issue 6 (July 1936).

History is an accurate mirror in every step of social evolution. It shows us that intellectuals (but not pseudo-intellectuals) have often played a productive role in the search for how to improve political and economic conditions but, more importantly, how to improve our ability to reflect on them.

Consider the relentless intellectual struggle of French authors like Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, and Rousseau which was continued with the Revolution and the storming of the Bastille, the symbol of a tainted past, replete with injustice. Also consider the work of countless idealist intellectuals who, as ordinary people, popularised these philosophers’ principles. The names of such intellectuals remain unknown. But the legacy of their work is still with us.

Their ideas, based on coherent and clear reasoning, reflected nothing other than the desires of the masses, which had not yet reached a degree of development to be able to speak for themselves. They showed that culture unites us with them, and against those who benefit.

They described the limits of excessive individualism. They rejected office and honours as obstacles to free thought.

They understood that excessive conformism is contrary to the spirit of progress and the improvement of social conditions.

They understood that the real representatives of the people are those that have been delegated by them freely, without coercion. That the most important principle of government is popular sovereignty. They defended a democratic parliamentary system in harmony with the dignity of free human beings.

They succeeded (more or less) because they were no blind slaves of the past.

10

On Contracts

“Comrade Ypi, still stuck on this one?”, a clean-shaven, handsome young man wearing a French beret and a tweed jacket exclaimed from the road, after spotting Asllan on the veranda of bar-cafe Kursal. For an instant, Leman thought “this one” referred to her and gave the stranger an icy look. He seemed not to notice.

“I recognised the brown leather jacket from a distance”, he said as he approached their table, pointing at the French copy of Rousseau’s *Social Contract* that she had borrowed from Asllan the week before. “I like the first sentence”, was all she’d had time to say, before being interrupted.

“This *volonte zheneral* of yours is a myth”, the stranger continued as he walked towards them, leaning on a dark wooden cane. A short cigarette dangled from a corner of his mouth, making his words at times difficult to understand. When he reached the table, he stubbed it out on the ashtray that stood between Leman and Asllan, and patted Asllan on the shoulder.

“There’s no general will *mon vieux*, just the will of one, and for now it wears a crown!”, he continued, gesturing at the construction site of the new royal palace. Asllan turned his head and, at the end of the boulevard, spotted the slow movements of a crane, like the neck of a prehistoric animal. The man lifted the book, flipped through its pages, transferred it from his right hand to the left, and slammed it on the table two or three times like a hammer, as if to test its resilience.

“I’m speaking freely”, he laughed. “I’ve got a job finally. Let the Education Minister know that cutting my scholarship didn’t succeed in crushing my ambition. Not that he will remember me”.

“So, you’re back for good!”, Asllan exclaimed affectionately. “Xhafer Bey was no longer education minister when it happened. One day you will forgive me for being my father’s son… What’s the job?”

“You’ll like this one”, the man said. “Back to our old alma mater. I’ll be teaching morals at the Lycée”. He tapped twice on the cover of the *Social Contract* as if knocking on a door and expecting a voice inside the book to react to his announcement.

“Morals? You?”, Asllan laughed. “Our old town of Korça is not known for its fancy nightlife. It will be part of your moral mission to solve this problem”.

He waited for a moment, then stood up from his chair and moved it slightly. “Do join us. Let me introduce you”..

The stranger turned towards Leman but was briefly distracted by his own image in the glossy dark window dividing the veranda from the interior of the new modern café. He took off his beret and ran his fingers through the dark wavy hair. It was carefully styled upwards with a brilliantine pomade that smelled of lavender and made the hair shimmer in the evening light. She noticed his shoes, worn-out but impeccably polished, but as he took a seat next to her, she could smell onion ino his breath, and the resulting blend of onion and lavender was so unbearable that she pulled back her chair instinctively.

Later, she would revisit this moment with anxious precision, the sort of precision with which we can only reconstruct events in our life whose significance is not at all obvious in the moment they happen, but becomes undeniable considering what follows, when memory is made of events needed not to evoke the past but to rearrange the future, like extra chairs in a crowded room. “I’m sure he noticed”, she would say, “He saw me pull the chair away from him. I’m sure it offended him”.

It was still light outside, the days were now longer, but it had been raining heavily in the morning. The sky and air were a despondent grey. The damp on the tables and chairs seemed to accentuate their shabby charm, the charm of every new object in the capital - new there, but always a refugee from another life elsewhere. The waiters manoeuvred swiftly between the tables, hoisting trays high above their shoulders, with a sort of restless impatience that made them glance at the sky every now and then, as if their life down here was also a shabby copy of something else unfolding high above. A group of violinists lined up to play on the veranda, some eagerly rehearsing the first notes of the Hungarian Chardash scheduled for the evening programme, others unpacking their instruments reluctantly, unable to hide their disappointment that the rain had not persisted long enough to lead to the programme's cancellation.

On Friday evenings Leman and Asllan usually met at the new bar cafe Kursal where the capital's intelligentsia - journalists, MPs, civil servants - gathered after work, in theory to analyse the latest political developments but since the life of the country increasingly depended on Italy, more to take control of their fate by means of gossip. She had started a job as a dactylographer in the Prime Minister's team a few weeks before the government collapsed. "I was the first woman to work in the Albanian administration", she would later say with an expression that mixed pride and unease, "but it wasn't my fault that the Prime Minister resigned shortly after I joined. Simply my bad luck".

This was ironic. Leman did not believe in "luck". She was convinced that what people experience as, or call, luck, is simply a way of converting human decisions into mysterious natural forces for the sake of reconciling oneself with their consequences. She insisted that somehow, somewhere down the line, a choice is always made: it could be a good ora bad one, taken lightly or at some cost, referring to the views of a single person or of many others acting in concert, a choice made recently or in the distant past. But a choice it was, always without fail. It was tempting to call it luck, she said, since luck is impersonal: there is nobody to thank when it benefits us, and no reason to feel resentful if it fails. Luck is just denial of responsibility by another name.

In truth, she did not consider it a matter of luck that first she was employed in the Prime Minister’s office, and then that the government collapsed just as she settled into her new position. Both could be explained with reference to choices, and in this case, the choices that shaped the fate of the nation and that of my family were aligned. The effects of the Great Depression had reached Albania like the delayed sentence of a mysterious crime: remittances from emigrants in North America had fallen sharply, most of the newly opened factories had gone bankrupt, unemployment escalated, crop prices collapsed, and in the winter of 1935, famine gripped the country. Increasingly dependent on Italian cash and isolated abroad, the King sought to compromise at home by putting his faith in a new executive, led by a former Ottoman administrator and experienced diplomat, a previous representative of Albania in the League of Nations. Key ministries were assigned to young, energetic, Western-educated graduates (mostly in science) who sought to recruit competent staff. Their technical skills, lack of political experience and relative indifference to partisan affiliations were widely applauded as the last hope to save a country torn between the great need for reform, and the equally great contempt for professional politicians. The term “government of the young” was coined to contrast it with the “old”, unsurprisingly given the challenge to come up with another collective description for what was little more than an aggregate of individuals united by a genuine, if somewhat naive, aspiration to turn around the fortunes of the country. It only took a few months for this ardent desire for change to be quietly replaced by the sober realisation that, in a country where the most common curse was “may death devour you”, change in this world was only feasible as a slogan.

Still, for all of Leman’s initial complaints, this was not the worst time to look for work in Albania. Competitive positions were advertised to recruit in the middle and lower levels of the state administration. Contacts, friends and relatives still mattered, but a little less than before. There was even a new mysterious phenomenon to reckon with: those who celebrated it, called it freedom of expression, those who deplored it called it the freedom to offend. New magazines, like Bota e Re (The New World) published essays by young progressive graduates like Asllan on the role of intellectuals in the French Revolution, some spoke of the contract between a government and its people as a necessity rather than burden. From the columns of the capital’s newspapers, journalists cautiously criticised the government, while mercilessly thrashing each other. There were lively debates about agrarian reform, which, even in a minimal form, was vehemently opposed by the country’s small but influential landowning elite, about secularism and religious exemptions, about the difficulties of promoting Albanian culture in schools, about the challenges of encouraging trade in Southern cities while eliminating brigandage in Northern villages. Every dinner party turned into a parliament session, and every parliament session looked like a dinner party. Politicians, civil servants, journalists, intellectuals and aspiring intellectuals, disappeared until the late hours in the recently opened cafes and bars, the only businesses that still survived. Downing one shot after the other, men broke out in loud political arguments with the same spontaneity usually reserved for singing at weddings.

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Leman did not catch the name of the stranger; she was distracted by one of the waiters who had come to clear the table and stumbled on the cane leaning against one of the chairs. “Let death devour you!”, he cursed between his teeth, as he narrowly avoided dropping his plates.

“Have you had an accident?”, Asllan asked his friend, pointing at the man’s cane. “Did you jump off another balcony?”

“Just a little ache”, he replied. “Is it that long since we last saw each other?”.

“Since Rue Cousin, yes. How many balconies have you since added to your collection?”

The man laughed. They had known each other since the Lycée, Asllan explained to Leman, but they had last seen each other in Paris, when Asllan joined a group of Albanian students to help his friend with an unusual house move.

“I told the landlady I’d go to my room to pack, and promised to settle the bill with her afterwards”, the man interrupted, “but I managed to get rid of all my stuff from the balcony. Then I jumped myself. She’s never seen me since. Thanks to Comrade Ypi and all the others. First, they received my suitcases, then they received me”.

He burst out laughing, and Asllan also smiled, his usual delayed smile.

"And I remember how you offered to pay the bill for me", the stranger continued. "There was no way I could afford to pay the old cow", he turned towards Leman. "Mister Education Minister had cut my scholarship. Apparently, I was no good with the exams. Well, I was never interested in science, they knew this when they sent me to study in France, because I had said I wanted to study law or humanities. In any case… must not blame the young Ypi for the failures of the old Ypi", he continued to giggle, "you're a good man, but if you'd paid my bill, I'd have to thank you for the rest of my life. What dignity is left to a man who must forever be grateful?"

Leman inspected him carefully and felt an aversion she couldn't explain. He seemed to be the opposite of Asllan: loud and boisterous rather than self-effacing. His excessively confident manners, and the way he took for granted the attention of others, reminded her of Gustav. He patted Asllan on the shoulders again with the same rhythm he had tapped on the jacket of The Social Contract, and for an instant Leman feared he might also lift her friend and slam him on the table, just to test his resilience.

"Ah, Asllan, Asllan, I am grateful to you my friend for wanting to pay my bill for me. There is so much dignity in that offer, the dignity of those who know their place in the world" - Leman wondered if the man's incoherence meant he was slightly drunk. "You are a scholar of the Social Contract and yet you want to start with the laws not as they should be, but as they are. Depart from the door, pay the landlady's rent, stick to contracts, respect private property but why exactly? Surely the world is not in order as it is, that much we agree upon.

What keeps you loyal to this mess? My view is first jump, then think. First revolution, then reform".

Asllan had the air of wanting to correct him but was too slow to compete with the speed of his friend's words. He struggled to find a gap between the sentences, they came out like defenestrated suitcases. He looked at the man, then waited for him to take a sip of his drink. "Reform or revolution", he murmured finally. "We spent many evenings over this", he turned towards Leman. "And a few rallies of the Popular Front too, or at least the afternoon ones. I think you always slept during the morning ones", he added with a touch of irony..

The last remarks seemed to provoke a change of mood - the man felt reproached. He suddenly turned bright red, and for a moment Leman feared he really would grab Asllan and slam him on the table.

"It's true I slept, but never on my own!", he raised his voice. "And I didn't always enjoy it. Since you like contracts so much, I might as well put it to you like this: I was contractually obliged to sleep. That's the difference between women and men, all those old French cows who opened their legs as wide as their purses for me, they desired to see me sleep, perhaps possessing my dreams was a way to the possession of their bodies. How could I say no? How was I going to survive after Mister Education Minister cut my scholarship?"

"He will never forgive me", Asllan murmured with a certain helpless expression, turning towards Leman. "We found each other again in Paris at a meeting of anti-monarchist students, but he’s still blaming me for this scholarship, as if I’d signed the paper myself…”.

He calmed down. Picking up a packet of Diamant cigarettes from his pocket, he offered one to Asllan. “That’s not the reason”, he said, helping him to light it. “There’s only one thing I won’t forgive you for. You’re too nice. I read your piece in *Bota e Re*”.

“And?”

“It’s too nice, just like you”.

“No defenestration…”, Asllan said.

“Culture, the role intellectuals of changing the world, education… What hope is there for education to change things in a country like ours, where barely ten percent of citizens can read or write?”

Asllan nodded in agreement. “Not in bar cafe Kursal”, he joked. “Here, it’s almost one hundred percent, if one excludes the waiters”.

“Have you seen what’s going on in Barcelona?”, the man continued with flashing eyes. “Our comrades are being slaughtered by those fascist beasts. And you go on about education”.

Asllan nodded again. His face had turned sad. “I know”, he said mournfully. “We must do something before it’s too late. I’ve been thinking of joining the International Brigades”.

“The International Brigades? You?”

“Why not? Now is not the time to quarrel between communists and socialists, we’ll both be wiped out if Franco wins. And we learned something from the experience of the Popular Front, together we managed to get Blum elected. We can leave our disagreements to one side for now, and defend democracy, defend the republic. In Spain there was a free election, and they're trying to overturn the result. It's the will of the people, it's unacceptable".

"Ha, I knew you didn't really care about socialism", the man exclaimed, "it's only those stupid elections you're worried about!".

"Both", Asllan said quickly, unusually quickly. "I care about both".

He turned towards Leman, as if to enlist her help. "What do you think?"

But Leman had not been following. She was distracted by the announcement that Asllan was going to leave Albania and join the volunteer brigades. It was the first time she'd heard of the plan. She wondered why he'd never shared it with her.

She made a vague sign with her head, as if to suggest she did not understand either socialism or elections. Her heart was pounding fast, and she felt something like an impediment in her throat, as if she'd swallowed a stone. She stared at the musicians who had paused the Chardash, and thought that their gold and purple waistcoats were shields stained by old, dried blood.

She had never given much thought to her feelings for Asllan, nor had she contemplated the thought of their separation. She looked forward to spending Friday evenings with him as one looks forward to the reunions with an old friend, except that here he was the only friend. There was a simplicity to that relationship that did not lend itself to asking further questions about its nature. She collected conversations at work, readings at home, news on the papers, opinions in the bazaar, and she blended them with the memories of her other life elsewhere, quietly anticipating the end of the week, when they would sit in front of the violinists in the veranda of cafe Kursal, and she would share it all with him. And sometimes they simply sat quietly, saying nothing at all for a long time, and Leman enjoyed that too: the silent company of a man who neither inflicted his own views nor constantly challenged hers, absorbed in parallel thoughts, or perhaps the same thoughts, shared without language.

But as she heard the two men discuss politics with each other in the background, and Asllan explained in greater detail the plan to leave Albania, saying this was the reason he had not applied for a job yet, she felt strangely resentful. Why did he trust this stranger more than her?

“It was only a Friday evening meeting every now and then”, she could almost picture Cocotte’s reaction to the announcement. “You said you never cared for him in that way”.

She remembered the rest of the evening as if it had unfolded behind a curtain, a theatre stage with restricted viewing. There was a debate about corruption: was it the cause of Albanian misery or rather its most natural consequence? Was it, as Asllan had suggested, “the tail of a snake whose head was in Wall Street” or was it *Capital* as his friend insisted? She vaguely heard the long applause with which the final piece of the violinists, an Albanian folk song full of passion, longing, and betrayal, was greeted by the other clients in the cafe. And she noticed how the man eventually stood up to take leave from them, his beret back on his head, a cigarette still dangling in the corner of his mouth, the same cocktail of onion and lavender, the same final look in the mirror, and how it all felt ominous now that Asllan had announced his imminent departure. And after the man had left, he vaguely heard her friend ask why she'd been quiet for so long, was she tired from work, had she been looking forward to discussing Rousseau instead, had she found the conversation boring, did she dislike the stranger?

"I don't know", she said curtly, unable to conceal her irritation. "I can't even remember what he was called".

"Enver", Asllan replied. "His name is Enver Hoxha".

11

A Sign

Cocotte’s reply to the letter recounting the last meeting arrived as expected.

“You sound very angry. To me that is a sign that you have fallen in love. I can’t believe you’ve never fallen in love before. I fell in love three times last week, each one more fatal than the previous. You can carry on pretending it’s not true, and act your usual superior self, but I can tell even from here, on Sabri Pasha street, it’s so obvious. It’s a good sign, it shows it *can* happen even to you. Once you calm down, you’ll acknowledge it, then you’ll accept it, then you can move on. Love is like war. There’s a very easy way out: just stop arming yourself. I don’t understand why you’re so angry with him. Why should he tell you if he’s planning to join the brigades if he has no reason to think you’re interested in his movements? Did you ever flirt with him? I’m not sure you even know what that means. Yes, he could have told you about the Spanish Civil War, but I believe in your last meeting you were still analysing the storming of the Bastille. Next time start with Shakespeare’s sonnets perhaps?

I’m still planning my move to Tirana. Can you please check if there is a Chanel perfume supplier there? I mean a reliable one, not people stashing stuff in their suitcases and calling it a small-scale business. Otherwise, I have to bring my own supply, but I’m a little worried it’s becoming too much to bring over. And Rimmel, ask about that too. I'm told they use shoe polish for their eyes. Please confirm. Don't try to guess by looking, ask someone who knows about these things. A woman, ideally.

Herr Gustav is more in Albania than Greece these days. He's hoping business will recover soon, he has full confidence in King Zog. More so than King George over here, not that it's hard. I'm surprised you still haven't come across Gustav; he has all his meetings in the Hotel Continental. I bumped into your mum on Vassilisis Olgas street the other day. She said you need to write to her too sometime, not just your father.

I remember that name, Enver. I met him once during a winter holiday in Korça, he was in the same class as my cousin, Sabiha Kasimati. He's rather handsome, isn't he? But his coat, oh dear, he needed a new one. I fell in love with him for about three hours. Do you remember Sabiha? I told you to look out for her, but she'd left to study in Turin. She wants be a doctor, not like doctor Elias, but a doctor in marine biology, whatever that means. Maybe she's going to save the lives of octopuses. Her father was a doctor in Adrianople before they moved to Albania. Asllan knows her too, he was a couple of years below her, she was the only girl in the Lycée, a rare beast like you, or perhaps I should say, fish. This Enver guy was completely obsessed with her for a while; I'm not surprised, they all were, including the teachers, she's so beautiful and elegant. She reminds me a bit of your aunt Shefikat in the photos I've seen, but more smiley. Anyway, Sabiha was mocking the boys in the Lycée all the time. She described Enver as rather mediocre but well-meaning. She felt a little sorry for him, he didn't always get her jokes apparently. To be fair, I didn’t get them either. You sound just as harsh as her.”

Intermezzo: Material Concerning Leman Ypi

Today, on 7/1/1956, in one of the offices of the Directorate of Security of the State in Tirana, I P.O. Second Captain D. L. studied the report of the meeting held in dt. 3/11/1951 with the executed Sabiha Kasimati. From these meetings I extracted the following material concerning Leman Ypi.

Page 16 reads:

Something similar, about the possibility of forming a new party in opposition to the communist one, was discussed with various other people. Among them there were Cocotte Leskoviku and Leman Ypi. They are mentioned as follows: "All of us, I and the three people I mentioned above were critics of the government and when we discussed the reforms that had been or were still in the process of being implemented in our country, as well as the composition of the government, we said that we deserved all that was happening because our people, i.e. the nationalists and the monarchists, didn't know how to handle the situation and made a deal with the Germans, enabling the communists to govern alone so we had no representatives. Even the Anglo-Americans can't do much at this point, therefore we must all organise for a resistance uniting all opponents of communism and start a systematic fight against them.

We discussed these issues at the Hotel Continental…"

I confirm the likelihood with the original.

Second Captain Dhimiter Lazri

P.S. These events took place in 1945.

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When Cocotte died, a photograph of Sabiha Kasimati in traditional Ottoman dress was found among her belongings. My grandmother had a heavy cataract at that point and asked me to fetch her the magnifying glass. She put it over the photo, and her eyes filled with tears. She said that Cocotte had been right, Sabiha Kasimati was the spitting image of Shefikat, but smiled more. She was a little older than Shefikat when she was executed by firing squad: thirty-eight. But Sabiha was no quitter, my grandmother said. When Enver Hoxha came to power, she had visited her old classmate in the office and confronted him: “If you kill all the intellectuals, who are you going to build your state with, tinsmiths and shoemakers?”.

“I advise you to read less of the Enlightenment, and more of Marx and Lenin”, Enver replied.

12

Skanderbeg Couples

In late April 1938, Cocotte arrived in Tirana, or, rather, her numerous suitcases did. They advanced into Leman's living room just as Hitler's troops were advancing into Austria, except they were met with less enthusiasm. First the dresses marched on, then a regiment of hats, followed by various brands of shoes filled with cosmetics for space-saving purposes, and finally several boxes labelled "reading" containing whole year subscriptions to French Vogue. A letter from Cocotte explained that since her father's plans to sell Villa Insurrection had failed, he had decided to stay longer in Salonica. Cocotte, however, was ready for a change, and asked Leman to be her host.

"Only temporarily", she explained, "I will soon move next to the Yugoslav embassy, into the recently renovated villa of an Italian businessman, someone involved in insurance, called Remo (or Remy in French)". But she listed neither Remo nor Italian entrepreneurs among her Albanian acquaintances, nor did she have the faintest idea of the location of the Yugoslav embassy since only her father had been to Tirana, and that was before Yugoslavia was founded. Her regular correspondence with Leman, however, had helped her paint vivid mental pictures: of the city's popular spots, of her future husband's expat hangouts, of the duration of their courtship, of the furniture in her new home, even of the name of her first and only child (she'd struggle with the scars if she had more, she said). She described all this in meticulous detail as to convince her cousin it would only be a matter of time before she would be entrusted with the honour of cutting the baby's first hair.

For the moment however, the honour manifested in the form of endless leather suitcases. Leman's mind suddenly wandered back to the days of their shared bedroom in Kalamaria, and how she'd sit there waiting for her cousin to emerge from her morning routine. With every announcement of a new delivery from Mademoiselle Cocotte in Thessaloniki, her patience shrank alongside the empty space in the apartment.

Eventually, Mademoiselle herself arrived - accompanied by celebratory gunpowder shots, dozens of diplomatic representatives from almost every European state, around eighty foreign journalists and photographers (including from South Africa, Japan, and Argentina), and five or six fighter planes that circled the sky like giant mosquitoes that had discovered the capital's two or three lampposts. The King was getting married that week. Hundreds of primary school girls in sailor suits, thousands of men in proud *qeleshe* (traditional Albanian hats), and enthusiastic, if a little sleep-deprived, women in colourful folk dress, had descended from villages north and south, and lined up waving prematurely plucked flowers on the streets of the capital. For once the streets themselves were deserted by the stray dogs, who, terrified by the general commotion, had decided to migrate in the opposite direction, from the capital to the countryside.

His Majesty had timed the celebrations to coincide with the anniversary of the wedding of Skanderbeg, Albania's legendary medieval hero. Cocotte had timed her arrival in Tirana to coincide with King Zog's wedding. Several high-ranking civil servants and representatives of the country's small but self-important aristocratic elite had been invited. Leman was initially hesitant to attend but when Cocotte insisted that "without my brainy cousin", her debut into Albanian high-society would surely end in disaster, fatally undermining her efforts to find a husband, she decided to also embrace the occasion.

We've arranged all this for you!", Leman exclaimed, wrapping her arms around Cocotte as she welcomed her to the apartment, commenting on the street decorations, Albanian flags, Skanderbeg paraphernalia, postcards featuring photos of the bride and groom, and the pins with the monarchy's coat of arms adorning men's jackets. But Cocotte was in no mood for humour. She had arrived severely delayed and dishevelled, on the day of the official start of the festivities, with hours to spare before the wedding ceremony, and since she could not calm down, she would not stop talking, now complaining that, for all the month-long preparations, the ongoing workers' protests in Salonica had disrupted her departure, now explaining that somewhere near the Southern border the car had broken down and she'd had to continue the journey by donkey, now expressing dismay that the donkey's owner was a Northern Albanian who pretended not to understand her accent. The detailed rendition of the journey was punctuated by shrieks that she had forgotten yet another crucial item for the wedding party, imploring Leman to confirm the rumours she had read, namely that the makeup for all invited Albanian ladies had been shipped from Italy, and would be supplied by the Royal Family free of charge.

She returned to normal only around ten the following morning, when she and Leman, clutching their small purses adorned with jewels, dragging the tail of their long satin gowns, reached the line of illustrious guests standing on the stairs of the Royal Palace, overlooking Mussolini boulevard, where the bride and groom were supposed to arrive.

The general mood was jubilant. There was every reason to celebrate. The task of securing a good match for his majesty had tormented the court for at least a decade, ever since Ahmet Bey Zogolli, a chieftain from the remote mountains of the North, and one-time President of the tiny Balkan state, had proclaimed himself to be Zog I, King of the Albanians. It had been a struggle not because - as his adversaries pedantically insisted - the king was self-proclaimed, for which king isn't? A king cannot be elected by Parliament or else he wouldn't be a king, and he cannot be elected by God or else he would be called a prophet. The problem was rather that in the case of King Zog, his self-proclamation was both ill-timed, and out of fashion. Too recent to be lost in myth, his founding act of the Albanian monarchy had erred on the side of moderation. How else could one explain the choice of the label of King instead of the trendier contemporary titles of Führer, Duce or Caudillo? The markets would have been reassured all the same, had he given himself that other name, the few scattered socialists would have been kept in check, he could have run elections for a while, then dispensed with electoral needs altogether. His marital preferences would have only been of interest to glossy magazines.

But he had chosen to follow a different path: he had sided with monarchy. Overriding the rule of law, he had remained accountable to that of God, a gesture that could be explained either by excessive modesty or, the exact opposite, the arrogant belief that history would turn out to be on *his* side, rather than *theirs*. Without doubt more noble, the game of dynastic politics was also more constraining. Who the King would marry mattered not only to the nation but sent a signal to the world. Would Albania remain loyal to Italy, on whom it was financially dependent? Would it follow Yugoslavia, who had once supported Zog in eliminating leftwing opposition? Would it be a surprise?

These were the dilemmas with which everyone had grappled for a while, sometimes as a matter of gossip, sometimes as a matter of survival, others still in the painful knowledge that there are times and places (of which Albania was no exception) where gossip is all it takes for a country to be wiped out.

The whole affair took roughly a year to be decided. The bride-to-be was selected by the King's sisters during an official visit to the United States. She was only half American. There had been some uncertainty as to whether the Vatican would approve the wedding, and when permission from the Pope finally arrived the whole country breathed a sigh of relief. The Holy Father authorised Europe's only Muslim monarch to tie the knot to a destitute Catholic Hungarian American Countess: Géraldine Margit Virginia Olga Mária Apponyi de Nagy-Appony, an elegant and good humoured twenty-two-year old, who, prior to the engagement, had been earning a living selling postcards in Budapest's National Museum.

The illustrious Habsburg ancestors of the Queen-to-be had bravely sacrificed their lives fighting the Ottomans in the Siege of Vienna; one of the King's best men was Mehmet Abid Efendi, the learned son of the last, now irrelevant, Sultan. Zog was an aspiring aristocrat, she was a fallen one. This too was a sign of the times. The Ottoman and Habsburg empires were now a thing of the past. For centuries, they had heroically fought each other, from the battle of Lepanto to that of Saint Gotthard, from the siege of Szigetvár to that of Belgrade. But neither could withstand the impact of railways. And since capitalism had already triumphed, who would be as foolish as to oppose a stronger union of the already dead? For once, Europe's new ruling powers could bracket their growing hostility, and descend to Tirana to celebrate.

"*Oh la la, regarde-moi ça*!", Cocotte shrieked spotting the King's sisters from a distance. "I'd heard they had their outfits made by Albanian seamstresses, claiming it was Chanel. But they are original, trust me, I recognise them, oh dear, people are so jealous here, they make stuff up. Or ignorant, I don't know what's worse… that lace is straight from Paris, just look at it…"

But Leman was not paying attention. Her own mood had begun to change, just as Cocotte's was brightening up. Not that the arrival of her cousin was to blame, or not any longer. At every wedding she attended, there came a moment where an unsettling feeling, a sense of impending doom, gripped her. She knew that it came from her childhood, from the incident with Shefikat. As guests assembled in the Royal Palace, the casual, cheerful conversations converted in her mind into the prolonged, agonising scream that she remembered bursting out of Mediha Hanim's chest the moment she had herself delivered news of Shefikat's death. Rationally, she understood that death and marriage were not supposed to cross paths. She had attended countless other weddings where everything had gone smoothly, joyfully even. But the strange terror she felt the moment a woman in a bridal dress was due to make an appearance remained. With each new occasion, she felt like a vertigo patient, who finds themselves in front of a new void, convinced that their survival up to that point has been pure coincidence, that all favourable statistical evidence means nothing before the tragedy that lies ahead.

Shaking, Leman pressed forward into the crowd, glancing over her shoulder every now and then, as if to check the past still lingered. Suddenly there was a collective hush, the gathering stood still. Clutching onto her purse, she fidgeted with the small diamond necklace, whispering "*kanarini mou gliko*" to calm herself down. At the far end of the boulevard, the bridal couple appeared, sitting in a new, bright red Mercedes Benz that had been gifted by Hitler. The future Queen descended from the car, wearing a white satin dress made of pearls and silver threads, a cross hanging on her chest. She tried to keep her head upright, but it tilted slightly from the weight of her high crown, which was made of flowers and culminated in a frame that depicted Skanderbeg's coat of arms. Dozens of gunshots were fired, the crowd cheered.

Leman kept her gaze fixed on the bride. Not so much like all the other wedding guests to admire her youth, beauty or elegance but searching, instead, for traces of reluctance, a hint of confusion, a secret sign that it was all just an illusion, that tragedy was about to strike.

She searched in vain. The "White Rose", as Geraldine was affectionately called, smiled radiantly, a smile in which there was no trace of either coercion or ambiguity. The blue-eyed countess seemed at home in Albania, at home in Europe, at home in the world: a rare image of harmony between nature and spirit. Had it never occurred to her, Leman wondered, that the man to whom she was about to surrender her life was a stranger, that it might all be deception? But Geraldine seemed incapable of engaging with thoughts beyond the immediate present - she was the happy inverse of Shefikat. She was immersed in the pure enjoyment of the flowers, the music, the cheering crowds, the admiring guests, her face alight with the innocent, ecstatic wonder of a child receiving new birthday toys, with no reason to doubt that the world can be anything other than benign.

She stared reverentially at her future husband, towering over her, twenty years her senior, old enough to have both loved and forgotten, usually preoccupied more by the condition of his kingdom than the feelings of his subordinates, whose ranks his wife was poised to join. That did not seem to disturb her either, nor did it concern her that he greeted the curtseying guests with a quick nod of his head, but that his eyes could have been those of his security staff. They moved constantly about, as if attempting to uncover an assassination plot, accompanied by a nervous gesture of the hands. Not even Count Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law, Zog's other best man, was spared the suspicious stares.

As they entered the hall where the ceremony would be held, Zog walked one step ahead, his left hand tightly gripping the sword that hung from his belt, followed by three men in military uniform who held the trail of the bride’s dress. A chain smoker, who would usually light one cigarette with the end of the other, he seemed tired, agitated, and more than a touch impatient: he clearly yearned for the ceremony to be over so he could return to more urgent matters. As the bride and groom reached the front of the hall, and took their places ready to exchange the wedding vows, Count Ciano came closer and gave Zog a friendly smile. The King looked down. The greeting seemed to embarrass him. Then he removed his white glove from the right hand, held the pen with which he was asked to sign, and scratched the register with the same mechanical gesture with which he would put his name down on an executive order. The Queen’s face lit up, she smiled at him. He remained serious, and eventually reciprocated with a quick nod of the head. There was no embrace, no kissing, no rapturous applause, but she did succeed in shaking hands with the best men. On the way out, she tried to hold her husband’s hand, but stumbled on his sword, she pulled it back and tried again, this time successfully.

“Will he still be around this time next year?”, Leman heard a familiar voice behind her shoulders, as the crowd dispersed and the guests were ushered to the official start of the reception. Without turning her head, she recognised it, and felt her mouth dry, her heart slip into her stomach.

“Asllan!”, Cocotte exclaimed. “We thought you were in Spain defending the Republic. What are you doing at the royal wedding?”

“The Republic is dead”, another voice answered on Asllan’s behalf. “It would have been poor judgment on my part to let my eldest son follow it to the grave, don’t you think?”

Leman turned her head slowly. Until then she had only seen Xhafer Bey Ypi in photos. He was bald, pale, clean shaven, and wearing thick round glasses with dark frames. He wore a tuxedo and a bow tie, and leant on a cane. His shoulders were perfectly erect, his head motionless, as if a statue had been suddenly brought to life.

“Xhafer Bey, what a pleasure to see you again, let me introduce you to my cousin, Leman”, Cocotte exclaimed.

“I can introduce myself”, the old man replied, with a tap of his cane on the white marble of the the floor. “But there’s no need”. He reached out his hand, and shook Leman’s coldly. “Mademoiselle Leskoviku is preceded by her reputation as an emancipated woman, the first woman to work in the Albanian administration I am told, and apparently one of the few to compete with His Majesty on the quantity of cigarettes consumed in one day”.

There was a hint of reproach, or mockery in his voice, but Leman was too distracted by the presence of Asllan to react. He seemed embarrassed, and she couldn’t understand if the expression on his face was more of slight guilt for not having made contact after returning to Albania, or of unease at his father’s words.

“You disappeared”, she finally mustered the courage to say, “after that meeting with your friend at Kafe Kursal”.

He lowered his eyes. “I left in haste. There was a group of us, the preparations were secret, and news of the departure came unexpectedly. But I failed the crossing. Xhafer Bey found a diplomatic contact. They stopped me in France, at the border. It was humiliating… I was too embarrassed to go out for a while. I just locked myself in to read and write”.

She hesitated for a moment, as if pondering whether to believe him.

“I was worried…”, she finally whispered, almost a confession to herself. Then she felt a strange sense of relief, as if the void she had been staring into had suddenly been filled.

A few hours later, Leman asked if he would marry her. I only have a few details about how it happened, and the story is further confused by the fact that she always reported that she both *met* Asllan at Zog’s wedding, and *asked* him to marry her there and then, which would have been not only intemperate, but also out of character. Perhaps all those previous Friday meetings blurred into one in her memory, and she singled this one out because she had finally become clear on her feelings for him, and sometimes to remember is just to find that rare moment in which we find a reason for our emotions, regardless of time. It could also be that their last encounter at the Kursal was imprinted in her mind as “the time I met Enver Hoxha”, an event whose subsequent relevance for her life might have affected the order of other things.

What I know is that they had been looking at the bride and groom for a while, and Asllan had ended up discussing the King’s relation to Italy, Hitler’s Anschluss and whether it would change Europe. He had then said that Zog was right not to trust Count Ciano, his best man; and mentioned the protests of peasants in the South as well as the amnesty on political opponents that the King had declared to celebrate his wedding, and Leman brought up the decision to distribute his nuptial gifts among the poor, especially the 50,000 golden franks he had received from the Albanian Electrical Company - a typical hypocritical gesture, she emphasised. He asked if she had come across an interesting book called *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* by an economist based at the university of Cambridge called John Manyard Keynes - she had not - then he suggested that the problem with Albania was that it was too feudal, too reliant on agriculture for socialist politics to make sense: first it had to liberalise, then reform. To this she replied that since even old liberal states were now turning authoritarian, the whole stage-theory of development had to be taken with a grain of salt, and then there was an exchange of laughter concerning the so-called “Skanderbeg couples”, the hundred and fifty weddings that had been celebrated on the same day as the King’s - at his Majesty’s expense, as the press insisted.

“Which goes to show we still need the French Revolution”, Asllan remarked, suddenly turning serious. “The one question our provincial journalists will never ask, as they ramble on about the glamour of the royal wedding is: whose money is the King’s money?”.

She did not answer but stared at him in silence for a while, holding her diamond necklace.

“Why did you return from Paris?”, she asked. “Why did you not stay there after graduating?”

He thought for a bit.

"Some plants struggle if they're uprooted", he replied, in his usual slow voice. "I suspect I'm like that".

"Have you ever thought about getting married?".

The question took him by surprise. But he tried to retain his composure.

"To who?", he said after his usual pause.

"To me".

Intermezzo: Telegram/Circular

PROVISIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE OF ALBANIA

10th April 1939

To the Albanian Embassies in Washington, Paris, London, Rome, Berlin, Cairo, Ankara, Sofia, Belgrade, Athens, Bucharest

To the Albanian Consulates in Bari, Skopje, Istanbul, Salonica, Bitola, Janina, Corfu, Trieste, Geneva, Vienna, *Boston, New York*

We have been informed by Stefani News agency as well as Italian radio and official government sources that the King and Government have fled Albania stop A new situation has emerged stop Order, peace and discipline are being restored stop A new provisional government is being formed stop A provisional administrative committee is in operation led by Mr Xhafer Ypi stop […] Always keep in close friendly contact with the Italian diplomatic representations stop Listen regularly to Radio Tirana stop Keep expats and students under control stop The administrative committee urges you to have full faith in the Fascist Government which wants with all its heart to secure Albania's happiness, progress and prosperity.

Intermezzo: Minutes of the Meeting Of The Albanian Constituent Assembly

Meeting held on 12 April 1939 Wednesday 4pm. Speech held by the Head of the Assembly, His Excellency Xhafer Ypi.

Gentlemen of the Assembly!

I feel in my heart a great joy about the arrival in Albania of the Italian Army, something that I had foreseen, and that I desired for a long time as the only means to achieve order, justice, peace, and prosperity in our country.

I am delighted that Albania, which risked precipitating towards an unstoppable fragmentation the longer time passed, had the opportunity to accept, as friends, the armed forces of the Duce of Fascism.

There was a time, which lasted the equivalent of a quarter of a century, when we tried to ensure with our own means the administration of this country. Yet, in all this time, our rulers proved not only their utter incompetence in the field of governing, but brought the situation to such a point as to give the entire civilised world the impression that our country might not be able to govern itself.

What was the only thing that we managed to achieve in all this time? We spread chaos in the country, we abandoned the people to the greatest misery, our very own people who got to the point of lacking access to bread, salt, oil, and all the other items of basic necessity, all of which prevented them from even understanding the real meaning of the word: “Independence”.

> The Albanian people, regardless of the small size of their gendarmerie and military forces, decided long ago to welcome with open arms, the army of the Duce. This is why, with the exception of a few brigands, there was no opposition. No Albanian would want to spill the slightest drop of brotherly Italian blood
>
> […].
>
> We are hopeful in the development and progress of our nation, because the great Duce, who has proven abilities even

greater than those of Hanibal and Caesar will not let our small but very old nation disappear.

[…]

Since Albania remains a sovereign state, we must elect a king. The best and highest solution for us is to offer the crown of Albania to his Imperial Majesty King Victor Emmanuel III and heirs in a personal union of the two crowns.

(Cheers: Long live King Victor Emmanuel!)

I will now read to this assembly the minutes of a meeting which I urge you to approve with the greatest enthusiasm. The meeting was held in the Italian embassy in the presence of his Excellency Francesco Jacomoni.

Chapter 13

Keeping the Fire Out

“I was supposed to meet Asllan on Queen Geraldine Street at four o’clock”, Leman said to Cocotte, stopping to unlace her muddy boots by the entrance of their modest apartment. “I waited for half an hour but he didn’t show up… I’ve no idea where he might be. We were supposed to look at those houses together. Then the thundering began.”

It was one of those cold and desolate November afternoons that prompted Leman and Cocotte to return home early, sip tea, play cards and catch up on the news. A tempest raged outside, and torrents of rain hit the ground like lashes from the sky. With each thunderclap the small apartment windows quivered with a violence that made Leman startle.

Cocotte lounged on the green living room sofa, utterly unperturbed by the weather, meticulously applying a bright gold varnish to her nails. She had an expression of deep concentration on her face, as if she’d been tasked to resolve the most intricate questions of the day, such as why Hirohito hesitated to endorse the Pact of Steel, despite having agreed to the anti-Comintern one, or how it was possible that, contrary to all prognostications, the Hellenic Army was still resisting the Italian invasion of Greece.

“I’m not surprised you didn’t find him”, she finally said, without lifting her eyes from her nails. “Queen Geraldine Street doesn’t exist anymore. It’s now called Queen Elena. You had the same problem in Salonica, you kept calling the Alcazar Cinema the Hamza Bey Mosque. If you don’t keep up with the times, nobody will keep up with you. That design you liked for the wedding dress, by the way, I don't approve of it. It's too plain. I don't want to say demodée but you see my point, it's only fair to let you know. And your hair is too short for it, makes your shoulders look like sticks, and… and… I don't know why I'm the only one to always worry about these things…"

"I don't want a fancy dress", Leman replied, still worrying about her fiancé's whereabouts, "I didn't even want a wedding party. But apparently, we can't just move in together and inform people there's been a change of address. That would be even more subversive than renaming Geraldine Street."

"Poor Geraldine", mused Cocotte, "I often think about what she's up to. It can't be fun to have to flee the country one day after giving birth… she shouldn't have married so young".

As she spoke those words, she was thinking about herself. The ideal Italian husband that would enable her to leave Leman's flat, and settle into a sumptuous villa next to the Yugoslav embassy, had yet to materialise. She blamed the war for the delay. "Better to be patient than be a widow", she would say, before becoming serious and turning towards her cousin: "I know you're not that fond of Xhafer Bey. It's understandable since he's not fond of you either. But you must thank him some day. Had he not intervened to stop Asllan at the border, he would have been slaughtered in Spain like all the rest of them. You would have become a widow before becoming a wife. Or shall I say, a wife-in-waiting".

Leman shrugged, uncertain how to respond. Their marriage plans had already changed twice, only one of which was due to her having second thoughts about the form the ceremony should take. At first, her instinctive aversion to wedding parties had led her to decide the whole thing should be settled in one afternoon at the registrar's office. Then Asllan pointed out it might be wise to inform her family about their marriage plans, and suggested writing to Avni Bey to ask for his daughter's hand.

"Leave it to me", his fiancée replied reply, "the idea was mine, and it would give my father a shock if you write out of the blue". A few days later, a telegram reached her parents in Salonica. "Getting married", she had dictated. "To Asllan Ypi. OK?"

Her father replied with a longer letter. He found it difficult to tell, he wrote, if he had received from Leman a strict order to accept a son-in-law he'd never met, or a heartfelt plea to approve of a future husband whose credentials seemed impeccable. He was nevertheless pleased to observe his daughter had matured. Unlike the time he had discovered that she was smoking, she now no longer feigned acceptance of all the other husbands he had in mind for her.

Then Cocotte insisted that the idea of a ceremony at the registrar's office made her feel sad, incredibly sad, so sad she could not, in fact, guarantee she would turn up for the ceremony, let alone act as a witness.

"I apologise", she sighed, "it's just that offices like that remind me of the population exchange. I just can't bear it".

Leman was nervous at the idea of a wedding party. But the insistence of her cousin, who had in the meantime managed to also persuade Asllan about the dangers of confusing the exchange of vows with the exchange of people, made her desist. The Skanderbeg couple, as they playfully referred to themselves, planned for a small wedding party to take place in Tirana a year after Zog's wedding, at the end of May 1939.

But on 7 April 1939, Italy invaded Albania. At least, this is what Leman and Asllan both called it, "an invasion", even though the term was by no means neutral. Leman's future father-in-law preferred to define it as a "voluntary union" of Albanian troops to Italian ones, paving the way to the equally voluntary personal union of the two crowns. For others, it was nothing short of what one would nowadays call a humanitarian intervention, a generous Italian mission to save Albanians from the abusive power of a satrap-king. In the meantime, Zog had fled to Greece, bringing to safety his wife, his newborn son, and the state's entire reserve of gold, now converted to personal wealth. On some days, even Cocotte would agree that there was a humanitarian aspect to the Italian "operation" (this was *her* favourite label) but it had to do less with the condition of Albania and more with a certain sympathy she had developed for the Queen. She was convinced that releasing the King from the burdens of the crown would return to Geraldine the husband she'd never truly had. For this alone, the operation was worth it. On other days, however, she considered it "*un disastre*", a terrible mess, for which she seemed to mostly blame the invention and influence of the radio.

Initially, the military impact of the Italian campaign on Albanian life was minimal. There was some resistance, perhaps on the first day, certainly in the first few hours, when Italian military vessels approached the port, and the gendarmerie responded with firearms. Several hundred men died. But how needlessly, the king's adversaries emphasised, when it became known that the monarch was now a refugee, and Galeazzo Ciano, the architect behind the plan, was planning to order the release of all his political prisoners, as well as distributing generous sums of money to the poor. The next day, as Mussolini's troops entered the capital, and marched on its freshly built central boulevard, greeted by the usual assembly of street dogs, some runaway hens, and one or two well-wishers giving the Roman salute, it was difficult to say if this was the beginning of war or a military parade. The three days of public holiday that were declared soon after to celebrate the union of the crowns suggested the latter.

Still, while the military consequences of the invasion could be at first be ignored, it soon became clear that the bureaucratic obstacles were far from trivial. The country was already controlled by Italy in all but name, yet when names started to matter, confusion followed. When Greece's consular officers received instructions that authorisation to visit Albania should now come from Italy rather than Albanian authorities, Leman's parents could no longer travel, and the wedding ceremony was postponed. Leman humorously speculated about a possible "Shefikat curse", but more banal than she had feared. There was no tragedy to be expected, only slow bureaucratic asphyxiation.

"Spring", Cocotte was saying to Leman, blowing on her freshly painted nails. "Spring is a good time for the ceremony, the war will be over by then. Perhaps April?"

"April is the cruellest month…", Leman recited with a smile. Then she heard a faint knock on the door, barely perceptible.

There was a pause, followed by a heavier knock.

“Who would visit in this weather”, she wondered aloud, instinctively tidying up Cocotte’s beauty tools scattered on the low table by the sofa. “Are you expecting anyone?”

Her cousin shrugged and made her way to the door. “There you are!”, she exclaimed as she swung it open. “Leman has been looking for you all afternoon!”

Asllan stood before her, silent, and drenched, uncertain about whether to take a further step forward or retreat, as if he’d stumbled upon their doorstep accidentally. His face was pale and gaunt, like the worn-out pages of an old book. Cocotte ushered him into the living room, and he murmured something the two women struggled to understand at first.

“Xhafer Bey…”, Leman finally heard, “Xhafer Bey… my father…”

It was the first time he called Xhafer Ypi “my father”, and the weight of those words seemed to catch him by surprise. He paused briefly and looked around, as if searching for the son whose father had just been named.

“Has something happened to him?”, Leman asked. On the whole, she was indifferent to her future father in law. She thought about how Xhafer Bey had never made a secret of his antipathy towards her. He considered Leman too open minded, too “emancipated”, “too much for Salonica, let alone Tirana”, as he put it, but she was grateful he had never gone as far as to veto the engagement. Their relationship, while not deep, was outwardly cordial, and though she was not exactly moved by anything that might have happened to him, she did

“He had gone to Starje, to his home village in the South for an inspection”, Asllan started again, in his slow voice. “The Greek counteroffensive…” he continued, before being interrupted by Cocotte.

“I hate the Greeks!”, she exclaimed. “First they drive us out, then they chase us in…”

Leman grew impatient. “Let him finish!”, she ordered her cousin.

Asllan looked at them helplessly. “My father…” he repeated, not knowing how to continue. He was visibly shaken, his face revealing a mix of disbelief, sorrow and regret.

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After the incident on the French border, when Xhafer Bey had effectively forced his son’s return to Albania, preventing him from joining the republican volunteer units in Spain, Asllan’s relationship with his father became strained. For a few months, they did not speak to each other. Asllan blamed Xhafer Bey, rightly, for the humiliation he had suffered among his comrades at the front. Most of them were now rotting in a prison near Barcelona, some had been killed. He felt ashamed and guilty. It took a long time to accept what had happened, and if not forgive the old man, at least understand his protective instincts.

The reunion with Leman and their frequent conversations together gave Asllan a new sense of purpose. He immersed himself in reading, he translated, he exchanged socialist literature with old school friends. Shortly after receiving his degree, he started to work in the legal department of the Albanian Foreign Ministry. His attitude towards his father changed slowly. Xhafer Bey, who was then chief inspector of the court of justice, would occasionally cross paths with his son at work, and acknowledged Asllan with a quick nod of the head, and a complicit smile. His son had clearly matured, he thought.

Then Italy invaded Albania. Xhafer Ypi became head of the provisional government, and later accepted the post of Justice Minister. Embarrassed and enraged, Asllan decided not to confront his father, but to channel his anger outward, becoming more active in the socialist circles that plotted against the government, while keeping a low profile at home. He pretended that the man he met privately was entirely unrelated to the politician whose actions he despised. He respected the father, but resented the officeholder.

He read the papers when he was out, and if Xhafer Bey entertained guests at home who engaged in political discussions, Asllan would discreetly leave the room. His pile of antifascist literature, legal texts, tracts and pamphlets had grown, but he kept it all safely away from his father's sight. So discreet was he about his life and commitments that when a new treaty was signed that made a mockery of whatever shred of autonomy Albania had managed to retain, it took Xhafer Bey a few months to discover that Asllan had resigned his position at the foreign ministry. Refusing to take orders from Ciano and his underlings, he had opened a small business selling liquor in the city centre, and eventually persuaded Leman to follow suit. Xhafer Bey decided to indulge his son, but turned sour towards her.

When Asllan knocked on Leman’s door that November evening to deliver the news about his father, he had been avoiding Xhafer Bey for more than two weeks. The last time he saw him, something had changed. Xhafer Ypi had just returned from the office, and after hanging his coat in the corridor, had poked his head in Asllan’s bedroom.

“Careful tomorrow” he had said. “Italy will launch its offensive on Greece”. He had announced this with the same nonchalant tone of voice in which he usually announced an imminent retreat to his bedroom for a nap. Then he had closed the door and left. Instead of ignoring his father’s words as usual, Asllan had followed him outside, trying to gather more information. Rumours of an imminent Italian attack on Greece from the South of Albania had circulated for days, and he was eager to alert his comrades.

“The Duce gave an ultimatum”, Xhafer Bey, who often regretted his son’s distance, explained eagerly. “Metaxas was asked to cede control of strategic sites or face a war with Italy, and the idiot apparently declared, and, I quote: *alors c’est la guerre!*”.

“Idiot?”, Asllan suddenly found himself unable to control his emotions. An urge to confront his father, suppressed for months, flared up like the last piece of coal on an almost extinguished fire. “Idiot because he showed the bravery you never had? Metaxas is a fascist but at least he is consistent; at least on blood and nation he hasn’t given up. That speech of yours in the Assembly, where you accused the Albanian gendarmes who died defending the country of being bandits, that speech still nauseates me. You’ve lost all dignity, and you’re even proud.”

“Dignity?” The old man replied calmly. Asllan could hear the subtle mockery of the seasoned politician in his voice. “Dignity you say? Our navy has just over a hundred men, the gendarmerie a couple of thousand, we possess a grand total of four patrol boats and two tanks, all supplied by Italy, as is the rest of our defence equipment, as is the training staff. Perhaps you don’t remember. Or perhaps basic maths never features in your dignity calculations. Have you ever pondered the size of Italy on a map? And have you ever considered that even in the improbable event of defeating the Italian army, behind Mussolini there is Hitler? Does your dignity demand that we send the last few hundred men we have to the slaughter, and then surrender to suffer the same fate, just with more blood on our hands?”

“Then what is the point of having an independent state at all?”, Asllan felt provoked. “What is the point of celebrating Albanian pride, the grandeur of our nation, the beauty of the language, when we must rely on someone else to sustain it? What was the point of breaking away from the Empire?”

“Ha, that’s a good one!”, Xhafer Bey chuckled. “As if we left the Empire by choice! As if the Empire crumbled because we fought so hard!”. He walked away, entered his study, and started rearranging the papers on his desk. Then he noticed Asllan had been following him, and turned towards his son. “There may be nations out there who make history. We are not among them, dear boy. To us history is done”.

Asllan shook his head in frustration. He reached for a bottle of whisky on the table, and tried to open it. He could feel the sweat dripping on his forehead, and his heart pounding. His father wrestled the bottle away from him. “What is wrong with you?”, Asllan murmured, clenching his fists. “What kind of poison do you have inside? What even is the point of you?”

Xhafer Bey pretended not to hear. “I worked for the Empire”, he continued unfazed. “I worked for the independent state of Albania. I worked for the King. When the King decided to look after his wife instead of his country, I worked for the provisional government. Now I work for Mussolini, for Ciano, for Jacomoni”. He paused for a moment. “I am just an administrator. We have a constitution - I make sure it’s respected”.

“A constitution?”, Asllan almost shouted. “You call that piece of rubbish a constitution? What does it constitute then? Even your favourite words in that ridiculous, shameful, Assembly you chaired, *independence*, *personal union*, *integrity*, they were all dropped from it. It says the King of Italy in Albania is represented by Mussolini’s Lieutenant General Jacomoni… What legitimacy does it have?”

Xhafer Bey did not answer. He sat at his desk, with his back turned away from Asllan. His son kept staring at him, his temples burning with anger. Xhafer signed one or two papers, then seemed to have second thoughts, and stood up facing Asllan. He was preparing to say something but before any words were uttered, he removed his thick round glasses, and spent a minute or two thoroughly cleaning them, as if the cogency of his argument depended on the clarity of his vision. When he was satisfied, he put them back on, then spoke to his son with a soft voice.

“The source of the law, the general will, the will of all, all those beautiful words that captivate you…”, he said, “I haven’t got a clue. Laws must be obeyed. Is legality the same as legitimacy? I don’t know. I’m not interested in philosophical questions. For me, dignity is just keeping the fire out”.

It dawned on Asllan that rainy November evening, as he sat in silence on Leman’s living room sofa that his entire adult life with his father had been a dialogue between the deaf. He found it unsettling. Xhafer Bey was too disenchanted, too cynical, but he had not lost hope that one day his father might change. “Everyone changes”, Asllan had reassured himself. His father had always contended that the essence of politics was not to bring about the good, but to compensate for its absence. He had staunchly defended rules, fully aware that sometimes defending rules just meant defending his own privilege. But it had never occurred to him that he might deserve that privilege, it was enough that change was difficult, the cost was high, and often people ended up just where they had started.

Still, he did not mind his son’s idealistic disposition. He was rather more concerned to ensure their exchanges were “civilised”, as he phrased it, that one did not descend to “rudeness”, which he saw as shorthand for extremism, for unpopular, destabilising views, the threat of which only he felt able to assess. Asllan was not usually prone to excess, his character was reflexive and calm, but there was something about the unflappable way his father reacted that always made him lose his temper. The old man was convinced that speech had no limits, except those dictated by convention. Still, one day, Asllan hoped, the war would come to an end, convention and justice would be aligned, and his father would see things differently, or simply find himself on the right side, on the side of reason, rather than tradition. Asllan would then persuade him that there are good principles, and bad ones, that there are right and wrong choices, that politics is more than just calculation. And yes, we never know how things might end up, but it is always worth a try. And sometimes it works. One day… he thought, and Leman noticed that what she had taken for drops of rain covering his face were tears streaming down his eyes.

He retrieved from his pocket a yellow, damp, folded piece of paper. “Dignity is simply keeping the fire out”, he muttered to himself. His hands trembled, and the letter slipped out onto the carpet. Memories flooded: Manastir ablaze, a little boy just over four years old, his small leather suitcase, a swing swaying from a pomegranate tree in Edessa, a father urging the boy to look after the family, his mother’s pregnant belly, a promise that the time would come where they would be united. He hid his face behind his hands.

Leman picked up the letter from the floor. A short text was typed in Italian.

“Yesterday, 16 November 1940, Xhafer Bey Ypi, Minister of Justice was on an official visit to Starje near Kolonje. A Greek bomb targeted the convoy of cars in which he travelled. He was pronounced dead on the spot; the rest survived. The remains of the body are on their way to Tirana. All ministries have been notified to put the flag up at half mast. A medal is being prepared. A pension to the equivalent of his full salary has been allocated to his widow and minor children. Xhafer Ypi died happily and with honour. Lieutenant Francesco Jacomoni”.

14

Red Stars at Dawn

Xhafer Bey's state funeral was held in the Bektashi cemetery in Tirana. According to Muslim custom, the women remained at home, leaving only Asllan, his younger brothers and a few uncles to attend. The day was unusually warm, very different from when news of his father's death had reached Asllan. The sun was innocent, and the sky had an idyllic shade of blue, so serene that the military planes constantly circling above their heads looked like plastic toys. Who would set out to kill on a day like this? It was as if the war, rather than just starting, had finally come to an end.

During the funeral, Asllan had found himself shaking hands with numerous strangers, greeting various government representatives, exchanging polite words in Italian, French, Turkish, English, German, occasionally even in Albanian. He couldn't recall what he had said; it was as if his thoughts and speech had divided, like officers on a secret mission. He kept wondering why his father, who had tried to avoid war throughout his life, and even intervened at the Spanish border to protect him, had ventured to the frontlines. He had travelled there unarmed, at the behest of a bureaucratic delegation, to reassure the peasants that supplies were imminent, and that the Greek counteroffensive would be managed with one last effort. He knew full well that with every mile he proceeded further south, his own life was at risk. Did it no longer matter? Did he want it to end?

Asllan stood next to his brothers, wearing a beige woollen scarf that smelled of naphthalene, and a dark coat that felt tight around his armpits - how tight he only noticed when lifting the coffin. Six officers in military attire led the procession, one of them crossed himself and murmured "la sua anima è in paradiso", his soul is now in paradise, prompting the Bektashi leader, the dedebaba, to give the officer a disapproving look, not due to disagreement with the sentiment or the act of crossing oneself (the Bektashis were famously tolerant) but to underscore the lingering resentment that, of all Muslim orders, the Bektashis still harboured towards the fascists.

Asllan noticed, as he carried the coffin, that it was light. He paused to readjust the grip, shifting his shoulder slightly and opening his hand fully for a more comfortable hold. He took a moment to straighten the Albanian flag: a dark red silk rectangle featuring Skanderbeg's helmet over a double-headed eagle at its centre, flanked by two black fasces connected by Savoy ribbons. Then he pondered the weight of the coffin: was Xhafer Bey truly inside? Or perhaps a part of him? He had wanted to pay his respects one last time when the coffin arrived from Starje, but had been subtly dissuaded by the workers overseeing the transport. A photograph would be closer to what he remembered, they suggested. As his father was finally lowered to the ground, funeral attendees began to toss multicoloured carnations. The Minister of Education, Mr. Koliqi held the funeral oration, but Asllan could not concentrate on the words. Immediately after that the crowd was dispersed.

For months after, he had nightmares about the funeral. At dawn, he would wake up and sit on the bed, pale, drenched in sweat, shaking. Leman often stirred in her sleep and stretched her hand to hold his but she did not know how to help him mourn his father's loss.

She was realising there was a part of him she did not understand. His protracted silences, his hesitations, his ongoing doubts, she sometimes wondered if she was part of them. Far from feeling more settled in her new married life, she had started to resent the circumstances in which they had decided to move in together - driven more by necessity than choice. Still, she remained hopeful.

The wedding ceremony had taken place a couple of weeks prior, though it hadn't been the lavish affair Cocotte envisaged. "No Remo for me, but a Renzo for you, my dear Lucia", her cousin joked. Like Lucia Mondella's engagement in the famous Italian novel *The Betrothed*, Leman's had lasted much longer than expected, in her case over three years. She and Asllan had continuously postponed the wedding, hoping for an imminent end to the war. Eventually they had to accept that circumstances would likely worsen before improving.

Asllan had started to worry that Leman's Greek citizenship would make her a suspect in Tirana: in April of that year German troops attacked Greece from the North and the country was partitioned between Italy, Greece and Bulgaria. The situation in Albania looked more precarious than ever. There was no guarantee that formalising their union would prevent potential separation, but not even attempting to do so would simply add guilt to misfortune. "Shoe polish lasts longer than state laws these days", Asllan lamented. "Still, it's all we have".

Leman's parents both joined for the ceremony, and - as a surprise - Dafne who had reconnected with the family after meeting a Greek man, converting to the Greek Orthodox Church, and moving back to Athens from Turkey. She brought the carpet she had weaved for Shefikat as a present, could not stop crying, and sang *kanarini mou gliko* at the small dinner party. After the ceremony, Avni Bey quickly returned to Salonica. The city was at that point under Nazi occupation, and although Gustav's contacts with the local German administration had helped keep afloat his tobacco sales when other local businesses were struggling, Avni Bey was concerned. Leman's mother decided to stay a few weeks longer, and in the end she was no longer able to return to Salonica. The journey had become too dangerous - exactly what Avni Bey had predicted would happen.

Apart from the surprise visit from Dafne, Leman and Asllan married exactly as their cousin had feared: there was a long wait in the municipal hall, various bureaucratic formalities, a quick exchange of vows. At least Cocotte was given a say in the wedding dress, which was elegant and expensive even though flowers were difficult to come by in the middle of winter, so she had to adjust her expectations. As a concession to romanticism even in times of war, the ceremony had taken place in the same municipal office where Leman and Asllan had first seen each other, performed by the same clerk. This time, he had brought out, as nonchalantly as he could, a register containing names of settled humans, rather than statistics of stray dogs, and asked to add their signatures to the list of couples who married on the same day. Leman noticed that there were more buckets scattered around to collect the rain from the ceiling, but no flower pots to conceal them this time. The stretch of damp on the wall seemed to have grown, and now looked like the map of Albania at its territorial largest: after its enthusiastic declaration of independence from the Ottomans, before the official recognition by the League of Nations.

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For their honeymoon, they picked Cortina d’Ampezzo, a ski resort in Northern Italy. Now that the country was officially part of Italy, travelling there was easier and safe. The optionss within Albania during winter would have been limited, even without the complications of war. The country’s situation had visibly worsened in recent months. Following the Italian invasion, Jacomoni had been eager to increase investments in Albania, briefly stabilising the economy after the turbulent years of Zog's rule. However, in the long run, the effects of the customs union with Italy became apparent - the Albanian franc was tied to the lira, and strict currency controls led to inflated prices. Peasants were compelled to sell their goods at low rates, and vast swathes of land were confiscated for military purposes. Although the country's industrial base barely reached four percent, the limited workforce became politically galvanised by communist groups that emerged in the main cities. Made up mainly of intellectuals and middle classes, they exerted particular influence on educational institutions. Pictures of Mussolini and Victor Emmanuel were regularly defaced, Italian flags were torn down, students and teachers often protested against school heads that forced them to pay tribute to fascism by singing "Giovinezza". Acts of sabotage now occurred regularly in the dockyards or at the chromium and petroleum mines that had been given in concession to Italian companies.

In Cortina, Leman and Asllan had left all this behind. They stayed at the luxurious Hotel Victoria, a resort nestled high in the Dolomites, seemingly suspended in that time-outside-time unique to mountain retreats, where one's proximity to the sky lends a mist-like quality to everything unfolding below. They tried to avoid reading the newspapers or listening to the radio, and almost forgot the world was at war. Asllan's nightmares stopped.

I have often tried to picture them together, to imagine those days, "the happiest days" in my grandmother's life, as she used to say. Thinking of family members in a past before we existed is like taking a fairground ride: you know you are going to end where you started but the point of the journey is the thrill rather than the destination. They are abstract characters whose stories are inevitably coloured by our imagination - often by what we want them to have been, or even what we want ourselves to have been in their place. As I grew up, I started to understand that my grandmother romanticised her days in Cortina, that she felt nostalgic, in the sense of longing to return to a place where she belonged. Nostalgia was for her not simply, or perhaps not even primarily, longing for a place she could call home, but rather longing for a time, the time when she finally felt she belonged, however briefly.

Yet, when, thanks to Çim's social media post, that unique time she had spent in Cortina suddenly converted into the two-dimensional space captured in an ordinary black and white photo - the famous Hotel Victoria, the skis resting on a wall, my grandparents on sun lounges - it dawned on me I might be completely wrong. There was a feeling of calm, but also apprehension on their faces. Asllan looked especially sad - it made sense given he was still mourning his father's passing. Did my grandmother forget about all this? Were the nightmares she herself later experienced the only ones that her memory stored? Had her nostalgia for that time made her lose empathy for her husband, for the rest of the world?

The archive is silent on these questions. Not simply for the trivial reason that one cannot expect bureaucratic documents to resolve doubts about people's feelings, but because even the facts that ought to inform my interpretation sometimes just add to the confusion. For example, where Leman's privileged lifestyle and regular expensive stays in luxury mountain resorts are cited as evidence of her bourgeois character and suspicious activity during the war, Asllan does not receive a single mention. It’s as if he never existed, as if he died before they even married. Cortina is misplaced, located in the Swiss mountains, confused with Davos. Even her honeymoon is recorded in the files as “residential stay in the mountains for health reasons” - did she deliberately try to mislead her spies? And to this day I haven’t yet been able to locate that photo in the archives.

I now wonder who was behind the camera . Perhaps Robinson, the Englishman my grandparents met during their stay in Cortina, just before he was to travel to Albania, involved in a secret operation to support Balkan antifascist resistance. Asllan’s concerned expression in the photo has something of a tragic premonition about it. Did my grandmother romanticise that too - the encounter with Vandeleur Robinson, or Monsieur Robinson, a real gentleman, as she used to describe him? Fluent in French, former history graduate of Emmanuel College Cambridge, one-time cadet at Woolwich military academy, a great friend during the war, and briefly after, she would tell me.

Leman and Asllan enjoyed Robinson’s company in the mountains. He was sharp and good humoured, with endless stories of his Balkan travels, a passion he had developed as a young man fresh out of the academy. After their return from the honeymoon, he became a regular customer at the liquor shop Asllan had opened. Every evening, he would visit and take a seat at the wine-tasting counter, sharing a glass of whisky with the owners, and, increasingly, sharing views about the latest political developments.

Robinson had white hair, small, brown eyes behind thick glasses, teeth that could be confused for dental implants (or dental implants that could be confused for teeth), and the general appearance of a Santa Claus that has been forced to shave. He was surprisingly popular with women, who fell in love with him just like children fall in love with Santa, as the physical embodiment of all good things in life, and without realising it at first. Cocotte fancied him - more for his character than for his appearance - though he was much older than her and already married, first to a Czechoslovak girl, then to a British war correspondent. This, however, rather than discouraging Cocotte, gave her hope. As she kept reminding him in Italian, broken in both their cases and therefore all the more appropriate for uninhibited communication: "*non c'è due, senza tre*/there is no two without three".

In Albania, Robinson was attached to what later became known as the Special Operations Executive or SOE, a British intelligence unit formed when the War Office, the Foreign Office and the Secret Intelligence Office merged efforts to encourage undercover activities in areas occupied by Axis forces. He had visited the country numerous times before and his favourite pastime was to photograph donkeys, preferably without their owners. He had been southeastern Europe correspondent for the League of Nations, and wrote a book called "Albania's Road to Freedom", narrating the ascent to power of King Zog, and submitted for publication shortly after the monarch's decline. The book, more than his eminent diplomatic and military career, was the main reason for which Cocotte usually turned to him as the absolute authority in matters of war and peace. She would visit the shop when she knew Robinson was there too, and tried to flirt with him by asking what she considered serious political questions that only he was capable of answering.

It was one of these questions, asked in all innocence one evening in late December 1941, that led to another remarkable incident at the liquor shop that Leman would later recount in extensive detail. That evening, another customer, a young bey called Ahmet who was a cousin of Asllan's, also happened to be in the shop. Ahmet – who I only met as a very old man in the early Nineties, when he visited us regularly until my grandmother decided to no longer open the door to him – was at that time a twenty something young man who had just returned from Paris. He had been sent by his father, an eminent doctor, to study medicine, but ended up donating most of the family money to support the French communist movement, before returning penniless and without his degree. In Albania he'd found a job as an assistant in a small private GP practice but quickly lost it - he'd been caught defacing a portrait of Victor Emmanuel near the newly built Hotel Dajti. One of his many girlfriends was Serbian, and Ahmet himself had now joined the Albanian Communist Party, which had been founded earlier that month with the help of Yugoslav activists.

Ahmet had a reputation for being short-tempered and getting into fights about principles, though his detractors insisted that he never truly cared about the theory. Being a communist, they said, offered him a chance of doing what he was sincerely passionate about, namely joining the picket lines with the aim of punching people. But Asllan was fond of Ahmet, and more generous. That would not explain, he said, why Ahmet became a communist and not a Mussolini supporter - in both cases there were ample opportunities for beating people up during demonstrations. Still, he kept his cousin at arm’s length.

Ahmet and Robinson had been sitting next to each other at the wine-tasting counter, the former quietly sipping a glass of whisky, the latter talking to Cocotte, when the latter suddenly decided to ask her “serious”, fatal, question.

“What do you think, Monsieur Robinson”, she said, pouring herself a glass of wine, “is the fighting soon going to stop?”

“Mademoiselle”, Robinson answered, twisting his moustache a little, as he usually did when he tried to explain complex things simply to all the women who admired him. “If you make a cake, you want to eat it, don’t you? The same applies to weapons. There have been rather large sums of money invested in their production over the past decade. I suspect a few more will need to be used, before we consider other courses of action”.

“Oh”, Cocotte said, “I thought the reason we’re fighting is to defeat Hitler. He is in Greece now, you know?”

“Of course, Hitler too”, Robinson acknowledged like a teacher encouraging his student, “but there have been wars even before there was Hitler…And, remember, you asked me not *why* we fight, but *when* we will stop fighting.”.

Ahmet, who had been sitting alone and in silence, passively listening in to their conversation, turned towards Robinson.

“I tell you why it’s not over”, he interrupted. He seemed inebriated. He was wearing a bow tie and a tuxedo jacket, as if he had just returned from a formal ceremony, but his bow tie was half undone and the collar button of his shirt open. His hair was equally dishevelled, and he had the dazed, disordered expression look of a student at the tail end of a party, looking for a fighting opportunity.

“I tell you why”, he repeated, “because you’re all traitors and cowards, as is your King!”

There was a sudden silence in the shop. The other customers turned towards them, visibly disturbed. Asllan, who knew how irascible Ahmet was, even when sober, tried to mediate. The day before, fascist flags hanging on public places had been torn, and he knew the police were on the lookout for troublemakers.

“Ahmet, here, calm down Ahmet”, he said, “here… here”, pouring him more wine.

Ahmet did not hear, or pretended not to.

“Your government”, he continued, pointing his index finger towards Robinson, “wasn’t it your government, the government of the United Kingdom, who asked Italy for permission to send consuls to Albania? In October 1939 they did it… in October…1940 (he clearly struggled to remember the date) only a few months after the invasion…”

“Shh… shhh…” Asllan tried again to stop him, concerned that one of the other customers might report to the police.

“The Brits knew they were recognising an invasion. Otherwise why would they ask ask their newspapers to leave the news for the last pages? And of course everyone knew what they were up to, I certainl did, already back then, and I … I read the papers… of course I did … and then there was that scandal with Ciano, which I am sure you also…"

"*Ahmet, je t'en prie…*" Asllan looked desperate.

"And anyway, even before that" Ahmet continued to raise his voice, indifferent to Asllan's warning, "why didn't you boycott the Berlin Olympics? You knew what Hitler was up to in 1936!"

"Shhh…shhhh… let's not have this conversation here", Asllan begged looking desperate, "we must have you both for dinner some time so you can clarify your disagreements".

"Dinner with him?", Ahmet now shouted. "It's over! It's over with clarifying disagreements! Now *c'est la guerre*! Now we fight!"

"Well, yes", said Robinson, who had consumed more alcohol than Ahmet that evening, but whose reason was usually less dependent on his passions. "But I must remind you that we're fighting on the same side. What you suggest happened a long time ago", he continued calmly. "We found unity of purpose for the future. We must be tolerant of what happened in the past".

Ahmet continued to talk over him, and since Robinson remained unflappable, and at one point seemed to ignore him on purpose, appearing more interested in continuing his conversation with Cocotte, Ahmet became impatient. To get his attention, he pulled the sleeve of his jacket causing the glass of whisky to fall on the floor and break. While Leman was on all fours on the floor, trying to collect the pieces, whispering "ogur, ogur" (Ottoman for "good luck"), Ahmet broke down.

“Why are you all looking at me?”, he shouted, staring at the customers. “There are demonstrations every day, and you all come here to buy champagne!”

Then, for a brief moment, he seemed to collect himself. He sat down, held his head with his hands and looked like he was about to cry. Cocotte went close to him, but Leman made a sign with her head, as if to order her cousin not to get involved. Ahmet stared at the door, and seemed to spot a familiar face.

“Taras”, he cried relieved, “Taras is here!”, making a sign with his hand, as if to call on his friend to offer help.

But the man called Taras showed no interest in the conversation inside. He was tall, well-built, with short wavy hair under a black beret, a pencil moustache and dark, thick glasses. He was wearing a beige jacket with brown stripes, a turtle-neck woollen jumper, and large-cut trousers that covered his boots. He kept looking behind his shoulders as if he suspected being followed, and was carrying a heavy box that seemed to contain books.

“Come out!”, he shouted to Ahmet, “stop wasting your time with those beys. Asllan can join us if he wants”, he gave Asllan a wink from the other side of the door. “If he doesn’t, perhaps he can keep those books for tonight?”

Asllan accompanied Ahmet to the door and collected the parcel, briefly shaking the man’s hand.

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“Who was that man who stepped in to prevent Ahmet from punching Robinson?” Leman later asked her husband, when the customers had left and they were preparing to close the shop. “The rather self-confident man with a beret, Ahmet called him Taras. He had a familiar voice, as if we had met before, but I could not say when”.

“He is an activist, someone I knew at the *Lycée*. He ended up teaching there, before it was closed for spreading subversive ideas. Then he joined the communist resistance, and a few weeks ago they all moved to Tirana to participate in the antifascist demonstrations. A delegation from the Yugoslav Communists made contact with them, and more or less ordered him and the others to found a communist party, dictating the programme. He’s become one of the leaders”.

“He seemed rather calm”.

Asllan nodded. “The last time I saw him he was standing by the entrance of cafe Flora with a bunch of activists. I asked him in French, *mon vieux que-est-ce-que tu fais ici avec les rouges*? I’ve come to fuck the mothers of all communists, he replied”.

“Not so calm after all…With reference to the Trots?”

“With reference to everyone I suspect. He’s not as superficial as people think. He’s come to see me in the shop a few times and suggested I join their movement. I suspect he’s the one who orders Ahmet to keep an eye on the English here”.

“Strange name, Taras”, Leman observed.

“Taras is a nickname”, Asllan explained. “From Taras Bulba, the Cossack fighter, the Gogol character. His moustache is fake too. He works in the tobacco shop round the corner - I suspect those boxes he asked me to keep safe were not books. They're probably anti-fascist leaflets".

"Taras is not his real name?"

"No, a *nom de plume*", Asllan smiled. "We were together in Paris too briefly".

Suddenly it all came back to her: the violins at Kafe Kursal, the well-polished old shoes, the confident, authoritative manners. And that smell of onion mixed with brilliantine lavender.

"Oh", she said. "Now, I know who you mean…".

15

Pick Your Side

Asllan sifted through the files on his desk - university notes, the first few issues of the magazine Bota e Re, some newspaper cuttings - and felt his head spinning. He was struck by the clarity of mind of the twenty-something year old that had penned the lines he was now reading. Education, intellectuals, masses, democracy, participation, enlightenment, enlightenment, enlightenment. All shadows now, banished forever to the underworld, after following him innocently to an imaginary escape… When did it all start to go wrong, he thought. When the fascists invaded the country? When Zog came to power? When Albania became independent? Nay, Albania was irrelevant. Even in times of peace, its problems had always been the problems of the world, just not very well concealed. When Hitler invaded Austria? When the Spanish Republic was lost? When Wall Street crumbled?

Bota e Re. The New World! There was a time when he'd been proud of the theories he espoused. They slipped into reality like a satin nightdress: so elegant and parsimonious. And they predicted everything so accurately. He stumbled on the title of the last article he had published: *The Development of Machinery and the Economic Crisis*. He re-read the first page. *Technological development should have helped ease the burden of work. Instead, in our contemporary capitalist system, it triggers unemployment, the main cause of the contemporary crisis. How can we resolve it? The sophistication of machinery must be accompanied by a reduction in working hours that protects salaries. The age for starting work must be increased. The pension age must be lowered. Workers' representatives must be given control.*

Labour and capital, prices and profit, money and commodities: these were the forces that shaped the world. Every value could be converted to a number, every number to a function. Of course, most people behaved irrationally, he knew that. But merely out of inertia. Evil was always the result of error, not ill-will. All there was to do was help people disrupt the pattern, encourage them to think differently.

Asllan closed the notebooks, then felt a strange compulsion to open them again. "*Liberal economists, whose theories belong in the museums, say that the economy always goes through* *booms and busts. They neglect an important detail. While previous crises were crises of scarcity, this one is a crisis of abundance and therefore…*". He stopped reading. He felt unusually affected by the confidence of his writing. There was something strange about the contrast between the effortless fluency of his written words and the hesitancy that usually crept into his speech. It surprised him that he'd never noticed this before. The text was not bad; certainly he did not regret what he had written. In many places, he agreed. Still there was something irksome about it. The pages exuded such irritating optimism, even when they made dire predictions. Technological development would provoke competition between business owners; the push to minimise labour costs would lead to an economic crisis; protectionism would stoke nationalist fervour; the resulting arms' race would escalate into an outright conflict between rival economic blocs. In short: war.

It was especially the mention of that final word, war, that had seemed to justify the optimism. He had been confident it would never happen again. One had to keep repeating it, but only as a warning, in the way an ambulance must keep its alarm lights on, when driving on a busy road. People would step away from it. The world had already been through such horror. Everyone knew that patriotism was the fatal bite of an innocent-looking insect. Those solemn speeches about honour, glory, the defence of the nation. And then what? The dirt, the blood, the cold, the degradation at the front. Millions had already fought, most had never come back. Hundreds of thousands of cripples from Tannenberg, from Gallipoli, from Verdun, haunted European cities. What mother would send their son to fight again? What father would not rather stay at home, and see his children grow?

He picked up the worn-out copy of the *Social Contract* that lay on the table and cleared the dust off the cover. For the first time, he noticed the volume had a foul smell, a mix of sweat and mould. He remembered the bouquiniste along the Seine, who had sold it to him many moons ago, a bubbly chap called Pascal, only a few years older than him. Pascal had once been a blacksmith but lost both legs on the first day of the Battle of Somme. "Si je suis tombé par terre c'est la faute à Voltaire, le nez dans le ruisseau, c'est la faute à Rousseau", he sang merrily, as he handed him the book. "I was the only one in my regiment to have survived", he said, in an apologetic tone. Every evening, when he recited his prayers, he wondered what had made his fate different from that of all his dead comrades in heaven. Or hell. Or nowhere. Pascal was not religious, he said, he recited his prayers just in case. He thought about his life, and how it had been so close to the end. And all the faces of his regimental comrades, minutes before the explosion, ran before him like cuts from a silent film. The following morning, he felt as if he'd been graced after a life sentence.

There were millions like Pascal, Asllan thought. People had been fooled the first time. Now everything would be different. The workers would settle accounts with their masters, rather than slaughter each other. He was a student in Paris when Leon Blum, only a few months before becoming Prime Minister, was dragged out of his car and beaten to death by the royalist antisemites of the Camelots du Roi. He remembered the anger that followed, the marches in the fifth arrondissement, the red banners, the revolutionary songs, the slogans. “Dignity to Work”, “Insurrection, not War”. “Socialism or Barbarism”. Was it really anger? Or more like a performance of anger? They seemed so childish those protesters. Socialism or barbarism? What a joke. Back then, there was still a choice. I guess it’s barbarism, he said to himself.

For a few months now, he had felt paralysed. His cousin Ahmet visited the shop every now and then to persuade him to join the communist party. “Comrade Miladin and comrade Dushan have heard your name. Comrade Enver, you know yourself of course. Others are keen too. Why don’t you join us?”

He had been unwavering in his support of the Spanish republicans. But it was easy to decide in that case: they had won an election; they represented the will of the people. What was the will of the Albanian people? Now that the Wehrmacht had moved into both Greece and Yugoslavia, and that Italian authorities in Albania were in disarray, there were at least five different resistance movements, each supported by a different coalition of states, each claiming to represent the people’s will. An “Albanian Communist Party” with Trotskisty leanings had already been founded by expats in Greece shortly before being supplanted by the new Yugoslav-influenced one.

Asllan was confident that the name of the Bolshevik leader meant very little to the average Albanian worker, but they had still absorbed the central committee’s message to “beware of Trots”. As to the partisan movement itself, even the label was controversial for those that were hostile to Yugoslav influence. Parts of Kosovo had been absorbed into Albania after the Nazi occupation. Asllan was suspicious of the two Yugoslavs that had helped found the communist party and gave instructions to the Albanians, coordinating with Belgrade, but mainly following instructions from Moscow.

“I am a Marxist not a Leninist”, he kept repeating to Ahmet. “I support a broad democratic front, not a vanguard sect”.

“So does comrade Stalin”, Ahmet emphasised.

Asllan paused and thought a little.

“For now,” he replied.

Sometimes he was embarrassed by his own passivity. Other times, he hated the sense of urgency imposed by the war. What was this Albanian resistance? Was it a glorious national struggle? Or just a banal civil war like so many others he had seen? First the communists made a deal with the liberal nationalists, then they fought each other. At one stage both groups swore loyalty to the antifascist cause, at another they traded accusations of betrayal.

Even Asllan’s British friend Robinson, usually a reliable guide on politics, was utterly confused. He’d told him that various members of the SOE, whose Balkan unit was based in Cairo and was tasked by Churchill to support guerilla groups in the Balkans, were soon to be parachuted into Albania. Not one of them, he had said, has the faintest idea as to what happened on the ground. They were briefed and taught a few Albanian greetings by an eccentric recruit called “Margaret”, the widow of a Cambridge archaeologist known to Robinson, and a former ethnographer. She had travelled extensively to Albania in the Twenties, collecting interesting facts about folk tales, plants and blood feuds. Then she was sent to neutral Turkey with the task of collecting destitute Albanian expats to encourage them to become freedom fighters. Still, her progress was slow, and British intervention had become schizophrenic. One day they thought they supported the partisans in the mountains, the next they had hedged their bets on King Zog who had in the meantime moved to London and ran his own resistance movement from a suite at the Hotel Ritz.

“We have to be pragmatic”, Robinson advised. “I suspect Mr. Hoxha is the best of a very bad lot”.

Asllan wished he could grab his former self, give him a vigorous shake and shout: “It’s not as straightforward as you thought, ok?” But sometimes he envied the courage and conviction of the young rebel he had once been. He secretly hoped that part of him was still there, and would one day slowly rise like Lazarus, whispering in his ear: “It’s not that hard, ok? And its not too late. Just pick your side”.

16

Je M’Appelle 10017

Leman knocked on the door of his study. She always knocked, even now, after almost two years of marriage. She was a little pale, with purple bags under her eyes, and a smile that always looked exhausted. She’d not put on as much weight as he thought was common for expectant mothers. As a matter of fact, she hardly looked pregnant at all, simply ill, and she seemed to react to her pregnancy, or illness, as was her usual, by just ignoring the discomfort. The first few weeks had been difficult, with spells of vomit, severe headaches, and trouble sleeping. But her mood was unchanged: she remained calm and composed, observing the changes in her body with the distance of a scientist looking at data from their recent field trip. She had recently felt the baby move and brought Asllan's hand on her tummy. He reacted as if he'd felt an electric charge, and immediately withdrawn it. Her pregnancy made her feel optimistic; on him it had the opposite effect.

"Avanti!", he smiled bitterly, looking at the clock, thinking about the Italian curfew that had just started.

Leman walked into the room hesitantly, gathering a few sheets that had fallen on the floor. She looked at him in silence for a while. She knew his head was heavy with thoughts, like a truck of unwanted furniture, and she felt she should wait for it to clear before adding another load.

"He's no longer making sense", she said after a pause. "He is repeating the same words as on the first day. Perhaps we need to start making arrangements".

Asllan trailed behind Leman through the corridor, which felt even narrower than usual. He dragged his steps on Dafne's turquoise carpet, which now stretched across the parquet floor, connecting the study to their bedroom like a bridge between life and death. In the dimly lit space, an old man he had only met for the first time a week before, lay pale in the middle of their kingsize matrimonial bed, his face a greenish-grey colour, his tiny, frail body drowning in a sea of white covers. His bald head already looked like a skull, and life had long abandoned his dark eyes - so much so that when the man started whispering something, Asllan was startled, as if he'd heard a ghost come to life.

"10017", he was saying in French, "10017. *Je m'appelle* 10017".

***

A week earlier, on a market Sunday, a little boy of about twelve from whom Leman used to buy eggs down the road had paid her a visit. A strange man, the boy reported, had fainted in front of their stall asking for directions. "We think he's your cousin because the first thing he asked was if we knew of "Ibrahim Bey from the pashas of Leskovik", the little boy said. "My dad said to hurry up, he is not doing very well…"

"Did he say what his name was?", Leman asked, alarmed as she followed the boy down the road. He shrugged. "He doesn't speak any Albanian, just … I don't know, I can't tell… French, Greek, German, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, whatever…" Also, "when people ask for his name, he just murmurs random numbers: eins, zero, zero, eins, sieben", the little boy opened his mouth wide, as if gasping for air. "He showed us a piece of paper; my dad thinks the name's in there". Then he smiled cheekily, as if a friend had just played a trick on him. "None of us knows how to read".

Leman spotted the mysterious man from a distance, lying on the ground, surrounded by passers-by, more corpse than human. The front of his head was bald and covered in dirt and mud, the sparse grey hair at the back was overgrown, just like his curly dark thick moustache and beard. Lying down like that, with his hands tightly gripping a piece of paper, he looked like a prophet who'd just been treacherously murdered.

His worn-out pinstripe suit might have once fitted well but would now easily contain three or four men his size. A half-broken pince-nez hang precariously from the pocket on his chest. His eyes were closed, sweat ran down his neck. The head was turned away from the road, as if he were embarrassed of lying on the ground like that, and, like a shy child, hoped to avoid being seen by not making eye contact with strangers. Between heavy pants, he kept murmuring something, the same numbers: 1 0 0 1 7.

Leman stared at the man with pity for a while. Then she confidently declared there must be a mistake, she'd never seen him before. She was about to turn away when one of the peasants retrieved the paper from the injured man, and handed it to her to read:

Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Saloniki / Israeli Community of Salonica

Personal Ausweis /Personal Identity Card

Registernumer / Registration number: 1 0 0 1 7

Familienname/Family name: Levy

Name/Name: Elias

Name des Vaters oder der Gatten / Father's name or Gender: David

Gebuhrtsjahre: 1880
Beruf/Profession: Doctor

Adresse/Address: (empty)

Saloniki den / Salonica, 21st February 1943.

President of the Israeli Community / Der President der Israelitische Kultusgemeinde: Chief Rabbi Zvi Koretz

“Doctor Elias”, she had suddenly turned pale. ”Doctor Elias… Doctor Elias…”, she murmured in shock, “I did not recognise you…”

“He’s one of those foreigners who come to Albania and lose their mind”, she vaguely heard one of the peasants say. “No, no”, another pointed out, “he’s not mad, just hungry… it happens that people lose their mind when they are hungry”. “He must have been walking for weeks”, a third tried to explain, “look at his shoes, there is blood dripping from his feet”.

Leman’s eyes darkened, she was suddenly overcome by a wave of nausea, and felt herself lose balance.

“I am pregnant”, she begged faintly, “is there a chair please?”. A peasant offered a sack of potatoes.

***

When Avni Bey had visited his daughter for her wedding in late November 1941, Salonica had been under German occupation for more than six months. He reassured Leman and Cocotte he’d seen no evidence of the Nazis’ famed cruelties on civilians. It was all just war propaganda. The Germans were, on the contrary, extremely respectful of traditions.

“Sure, they did ask where the ghetto was when they arrived”, he had said laughing, “they’re probably used to their own cities. But it takes more than a bunch of stupid Fritzes to stop people sharing the food they’ve cooked together for centuries”.

There was no Jewish question in *Salonique la Magnifique*, he insisted. Doctor Elias was not too worried either. He knew personally the chief rabbi, born in Galicia under the Austro-Hungarian empire and with a doctorate from Berlin. He had written his dissertation on “Depictions of hell in the Quran, and its prototypes in Jewish literature”, he was extremely cultivated, and knew the Muslims, the Jews, the Greeks, and the Germans inside out. An Ashkenazi Jew, fine, and the Salonican Sephardi were a little annoyed when he arrived, with his posh Austrian ways, as if he’d come from the city, and they were all ignorant peasants. Still, he excelled at keeping the community calm and industrious: tough with extremists, generous with the needy. Even the Fritzes realised he was the only Jew in Salonica they could do business with; he spoke German with them, and was equally efficient. They’d first arrested him, brought him to some Gestapo office in Vienna, then reinstated him; they were no fools. “All is for the best, in the best of all possible worlds”, Elias had said, ever optimistic.

Indeed, for a while in Salonica, all had been, if not for the best, at least good enough compared to other places. Naturally, there were frictions here and there, and especially concern about the looting of books and artefacts from the Jewish community, but the main problems were economic. Greeks, Jews, Albanians, Armenians, the newly arrived Bulgarian refugees, were all affected by the same problems. Biting inflation caused black market prices to soar, and a blockade on the Aegean by the British navy prevented supplies from reaching the city. “I saw a street vendor the other day catch a rat”, Avni Bey had written, “apparently it tastes as good as rabbit”. Still, despite everything, life continued much the same. After a day of work at the clinic, Elias would join Avni Bey at the Hotel Continental, where they would unwind over an aperitif and share a pipe. The doctor continued to visit the cemetery on Sunday to collect inscriptions from the graves, “looking after both the living and the dead”, as he continued to joke.

On 8 July 1942, however, more than a year after the German army had entered the city, things took a turn for the worse. All Jewish men between eighteen and forty-five were ordered to present themselves on Freedom Square, from where they were ushered to a nearby office to be issued with labour cards for construction work. For a while, senior members of the Greek local administration had been complaining to the German occupying forces that “Jews had never contributed anything to the community, they were too selfish, they led parallel lives, they just plundered resources from the state”. There were now rumours that different instructions had arrived, not from Berlin but from local authorities, to finally force the Jews to work.

Waiting in line that day, several men were beaten up or humiliated into doing calisthenic exercises under the scorching sun. Many fainted from the wait and exhaustion, while German actors from *Kraft durch Freude*, the Nazi leisure organisation, laughed and took photographs. Everyone knew at that point that the months of compromise were over.

In the weeks that followed, Doctor Elias’ schedule changed dramatically. He was old and therefore exempt from forced labour, but doctors were now needed more than ever. At the construction sites, hundreds of people collapsed daily from the heat, malnutrition and the miserable safety conditions, and since they received no help from the authorities, medically trained Jews had to step in. Thousands died of fatigue and overwork and, when winter came, the situation deteriorated. Chief rabbi Koretz tried to negotiate their release by offering to replace them with professional Greek workers whose salaries would be paid by the Jewish community. The Levantine contracting firm demanded three million drachmas but since the funds raised failed to match the required sum, an old proposal was revived: to cede the land of the Jewish cemetery to liquidate the remaining sum. Elias Levy was involved with that too. Indeed, he was busier than ever collecting inscriptions from the tombstones. The notes he had gathered over many years were now urgently needed to persuade the authorities to preserve historically valuable samples.

This was the last time Leman had heard about him, in a letter sent by her father some time in autumn 1942 where he reported the cemetery saga, asking her to keep the news secret from Cocotte. There was hope for her mother, he had written, since she died during the fire and there was talk of saving those dead after 1912. "There's no point in making that poor girl sad, if she can visit her mother at some new site", Avni Bey wrote, in the same detached tone he used to inform her of Mediha Hanim's declining health, as if he were simply forecasting the weather.

The cemetery was razed to the ground around Christmas 1942: neither new nor old graves could be rescued. The authorities grew impatient with the slowness of the Jewish workers and brought in their own demolition teams. Millions of bricks and stones were sold or distributed to churches, theatres, and firms involved in railway constructions, roads, and houses. Family members rushed to the cemetery as they tried to rescue recently buried bodies of loved ones. Hundreds of skeletons, endless piles of bones were now scattered to the sides of the road. They were devoured by street dogs who, in the winter of 1942, were hungrier than humans, but acted with less purpose. Not long after that, being a dog in Salonica would be preferable to being a Jew, my grandmother told me many years later.

By the beginning of the year, all Jewish citizens of Salonica were forced to wear the star of David and could no longer access public transport. Jewish houses were requisitioned and occupied by homeless refugees; their property was confiscated. The chief rabbi was busy compiling lists for registration in the newly established ghetto, around Sarantaporou Street, where Leman once had attended the Lycée. His fellow Jews now resented his once celebrated Prussian efficiency. Couldn't he act more slowly, delay things, create bureaucratic obstacles? What was the reason for such zeal, for shouting orders to be quick, for asking his collaborators to work even at night, even on Saturdays? Why couldn't he be more like them, take it easy, let the wheels of administration grind with difficulty?

It was Gustav who informed Avni Bey that if he cared about his friend Elias, he should alert him to leave the city as soon as possible, adding enigmatically: "the war is getting tougher". In a desperate effort to save his friend, Avni Bey contacted a Greek singer nicknamed Franzi who hung out with the SS. Doctor Elias had once cured Franzi from syphilis, and Avni

Bey knew she owed him her life. She reached out to her German lover, and with his help managed to smuggle Elias Levy out of the city, and into the mountains. From there, Greek shepherds accompanied the doctor to the border with Albania, which he then crossed on foot, Jewish ID in hand, registration number 10017. A few days later, the first deportation train left the ghetto, destination Auschwitz.

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"My name is 10017. It is my name, you don't believe it?", Elias, who was again in a state of feverish confusion, said when he spotted Asllan by his bedside. Since Leman had brought him to their house, he alternated bouts of delirium with moments of lucidity. He had been diagnosed with pneumonia, with only a few days left to live.

"My name is 10017", he insisted with a surprisingly strong voice, the voice of men who muster all their strength to part forever with the world.

"Not the number of stones, the stones are far, far more. Would you like to look at them?", he said, lifting both arms while coughing, and slipping them between the sheets as if he searched for something underneath.

"θα ήθελες να τα δεις?", he repeated in Greek, "do take a look. I covered them because they were shivering, it was cold up in the mountains, and they were shivering…I wasn't sure if they would make it".

Asllan looked at Leman, who was sitting by the side of the bed, for a hint of how to respond.

She gave him a mysterious nod of the head. “I don’t sell them, don’t worry”, Elias continued breathing heavily. “I brought them with me because they were too scared, they did not want to be left alone. They travelled a long way but they are safe now; they are very, very safe. I cuddled them all the way to make sure they didn’t cry”.

He opened his dark eyes wide, and for a split second the light in them seemed to return.

“Look, they’re smiling now. Let me show you *Monsieur*. This is number sixteen. He’s not old at all, perhaps five or six, and he has no idea where he is. And you… you must promise to be very gentle with these ones here”. He tapped three times on the bed. “Look, three hundred, three hundred and one, three hundred and two, they are very old…old like the destruction of the first temple. And… and.. you know… they speak so fast because they worry their age makes everyone think they are stupid or that they may not have time to finish because they have too much to say…”.

He made an exhausted gesture with his hand, then wriggled his feet inside the blanket as if trying to kick something. “This one down here in particular, four hundred and two, he thinks he’s the leader, and his wife is constantly complaining that I’m taking her to the wrong place, while their newborn three hundred and four just can’t settle, but now, now he’s gone to sleep, so we must be very quiet… shhhh…shhhh…”.

He closed his eyes, then opened them again. For a few seconds, the room had fallen silent. Doctor Elias looked helpless, then started again, “well, *Monsieur*, you see, they won’t let him sleep anyway, I know it. As soon as it’s quiet they get scared they have been left alone and start fighting with each other, and the worst thing, the very worst thing, the worst of all worst possible worlds is that… that when they fight they start to disintegrate, become dust… like this… pah…pah..pah…"

With a vigour that surprised Leman, Elias pulled out both hands from under the covers and started to clap.

"Please Doctor Elias, please, you must rest", she whispered. But he ignored her until the sudden noise made by his own increasingly vigorous claps made him startle.

"Hey, what are you doing?", he turned towards Asllan aggressively, raising his voice. "Why did you take my stones, give them back! Where did you put them? Can't you see they don't know who you are, they don't want to talk to you! You bastard, give them back, I will kill you if you do that, do you get it? They are mine, mine! *Ich werde dich töten! Du Schwein*! Give them back, right now, I order you to give them back!".

"*Kalmo, kalmo*", Leman said gently in Ladino. "The stones are safe. We want to help you look after them, don't worry, I promise. "He loves them too", she pointed at Asllan, "he has his own stones, he does not want yours, he only wants to help you protect them".

She started caressing his head gently, and the old man became mellow, soon tears started flowing from his half dead eyes. A few minutes passed and as they all stood there, in silence, his breathing became heavy. He closed his eyes again, and started to speak slowly, with great difficulty. He seemed to have become lucid.

"This…", he said, "I don't deserve this. *Merci muncho*, *merci* Ibrahim Bey", he said half in French and half in Ladino, then continued in Ottoman Turkish: "Your grandmother… poor Mediha Hanim, she was such a wise woman. When Ibrahim Pasha died, she said your grandfather wanted to die with dignity…", he coughed again, his voice was disappearing. "And she… she made this story up, that he'd had a heart attack because the heart… she thought… the heart is the most important". He closed his eyes, and held on to her hand. "And … I … I remember telling her", he continued, "it only matters how one lives…".

"I remember that story", Leman said with a sad smile, "I never knew what the truth was, and what she made up. But I remember when I used to call myself Ibrahim Bey, and all those canaries in the house that sang so loud, when you came to visit us on Sundays. Sometimes I still hear them in my head…"

"It's not true what I said to her", Elias continued, absorbed in his own thoughts, "it was never true. And yet… I was too young and stupid. And I had too much faith in… in…". He started coughing, and Leman tried to prop the pillow up for him but he made a gesture to leave it.

"*Ne t'inquiète pas kerida*", he said, "I need no pillow where I am going", there was now only a whisper left in his voice, "I didn't come looking for… for a home", he said. He was struggling, his body was rigid, more stone than human. "Just a grave… a grave is all I wanted… and I am here now… isn't that… isn't that… *magnifique*... All is for the… for the…" but he did not manage to finish the last sentence.

PART 3

Prologue

A Recent Visit to Thessaloniki

“What is the reason of your visit to Thessaloniki?”

“Work”, I reply curtly.

A middle-aged security officer with sharp, blue eyes and a compact athletic build has just taken over from his colleague at the security booth in Makedonia airport. He has blond, thinning hair and delicate facial features which clash with his strong neck and shoulder muscles, and he wears a badge where his name is visible in black writing: “Socrates A”.

He channels that special start-of-the week eagerness to work which would be highly desirable in any bureaucracy, except for a border control booth, especially if you happen to carry an Albanian passport.

Socrates asks what kind of work I do.

“I am a writer”, I reply. He looks at me as if the answer can’t be taken seriously, then begins to inspect my passport, which sits on top of a large pile of documents submitted for his scrutiny: boarding pass, return flight, university invitation, hotel reservation. He pulls out an old hotel magnetic key that seems to have joined the rest of the evidence accidentally, and respectfully returns it to me.

“I’m also an academic”, I say, to make my case more straightforward. “I’m here to visit the archives for a research project”.

“Aha”, Socrates says, but shows no intention of stamping the passport, which I take as an invitation to elaborate further.

“In addition to visiting the archives, I have been invited to give a lecture at Aristotle University”.

“What kind of lecture?”

“On dignity”.

“Whose dignity?”

The question is a little perplexing. Still, there is no room for hesitation when standing in front of a security officer, even if his name is Socrates.

“Well, nobody in particular, just different concepts: dignity as status, dignity as rights, dignity as moral worth, that sort of thing”.

He looks up from the files again.

“Dignity in the office?”, he repeats as if to ensure he has understood.

I don’t think I should be refining this. I nod in agreement.

“And what do you do with it?”, he insists.

“I… erm… erm…I analyse ideas, think about their use in history, true, false, good, bad, that sort of thing. I’m a philosopher”.

“You said you’re a writer”, Socrates retorts, looking at me with the familiar satisfaction of the border officer who has spotted a contradiction.

The dialogue can now proceed in any direction. The queue is long, and a toddler is just starting a moan that will soon transform into a full-blown tantrum.

“I’m from Crete”, he adds inexplicably with a smile. “Buuut…”, he looks at me with a mischievous grin, “you’re the philosopher, you must know this. It’s said that all Cretans are liars. If I say I’m a Cretan, and that all the Cretans are liars, am I lying or am I telling the truth?”.

In return, I offer a sheepish smile.

“Philosophers, historians, politicians, all liars!”, he firmly declares, and after glancing briefly at my photo on the passport gives it a stamp so vigorous it looks like he’s hammering it. “I only like artists. You should visit a taverna and listen to some live music. Enjoy your time in Thessaloniki *Madame*!”

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Upon leaving the airport, I decide to take a walk around the university campus. Despite my confident answers to the security officers, it is not very clear even to me what exactly the purpose of my visit to Thessaloniki is. I call it lecturing because it is more familiar, less disturbing than the real reason. Ever since I read those files from the Security Service archives in Albania, I’ve found so many mysterious elements, now also concerning my grandmother’s life in Greece, that I keep hopping from one archive to the other to try and piece together the missing links.

It’s a scorching hot summer day, one of those early afternoons in which even the giant Aristotle statue that sits in the middle of the campus seems to be sweating. I pull out my phone to check the map and find a message from one of my hosts at the university.

“The archive today closes at 3pm - you won’t be able to make it after your lecture”. I look up at the statue of Aristotle, and it occurs to me that the root of the word archive is the ancient Greek *arche*, the first principle of everything. “Signorina”, the teacher’s voice from my *Metaphysics* exam at university, rings back in my head: “why is the *arche* so important for Aristotle? And why does modern philosophy, from Descartes onwards, think of the *arche*, of the first principle, as doubt?”

I pull out the map a second time, and check it again, exasperated. I am hopeless with maps. I am also convinced that philosophical doubt should not extend to street signs.

A group of students stands in front of a building surrounded by scaffolding, eating souflaki and having an animated chat. Reluctantly, after another failed round which ends where it has started, I decide to stop and ask a tall girl with dark curly hair for directions.

“Excuse me”, I say, “do you know where the cemetery is exactly? I can’t seem to find it…”

“The cemetery…hm…”, she thinks for a moment. “This is the university. Which bus is it?”, she turns to her friends.

“No, no, I don’t mean the new cemetery, I mean the old one, the Jewish one”. I explain that I am looking for the grounds of the old Jewish cemetery which should be exactly where the university now lies, and that there should be a memorial site.

“The Jewish cemetery was built under the university?”, she repeats confused.

“Well, the other way round”, I say. “The university was built on the cemetery grounds”.

“Whaat?”, she replies, and turns to inspect the scaffolding behind her, as if she’s now expecting ghosts to emerge from the construction site.

“It happened a while ago”, I reply, trying to reassure her. “It’s an old site”.

“Aaah”, she breathes a sigh of relief. “I’m from Athens”, she says slightly apologetically “and in my first year… I study biology. I don’t know these culture things. Do you want to see the *idadi*?”

“The Ithaki?”

“The idadi… the old Muslim school, where the philosophy lecture hall is”, she says, perhaps thinking I am a tourist. Home, school, cemetery, what does it matter, the keen tourist will enjoy them all. “It’s a beautiful old building”, she says.

I shake my head with a smile to politely decline. I must look vaguely disappointed because she quickly turns to another friend, a mature student with thick glasses and an Olympiacos football shirt who is sitting on the steps a few metres away.

“Dimitrios… Dimitrios…” she shouts something in Greek. “Dimitrios is great with history”, she says.

The boy called Dimitrios stands up and walks towards me. “I’ll take you to the cemetery”, he says, “it’s not far. There’s not much to look at though, just a couple of stones. The Neo-Nazis love to hang out there. Let’s hope the stones are OK”.

My phone rings unexpectedly. It’s my mother, asking if I have arrived, and when I plan to visit the archive.

“*Edhe* ti *shqiptare*?”,[1] Dimitrios suddenly asks having heard me speak Albanian. Now we’re both laughing.

“Oh, Albanians”, I say. “We’re not that many, but we are everywhere…”.

He chuckles and shakes my hand.

“My real name is not Dimitrios”, he says, “it’s Denis. My parents changed it when we moved to Greece. To fit in, like everyone else. My father reckoned it would be easier to find a job if we were all baptised as Orthodox. As a matter of fact, we’re Muslim.”

“Nice to meet you. My name is Lea”.

“Aha, that’s a common Jewish name”, he remarks. “Is that why you’re interested in the cemetery?”.

“No, my family is Muslim too”, I reply. “Well, some relatives were Dönme, you know, the Jews that converted to Islam, and some are Catholic, and some are Orthodox, bit of a mess like everyone in Albania. I’d say their main religion is capitalism”.

“Same with mine!”, he laughs. “Though being migrants in Greece during the eurocrisis has shaken some of the faith. What brings you to Thessaloniki?”

I explain that my grandmother was born here, and that I have come to give a lecture and research the archives.

“Archives!”, he exclaims. “Tell me about archives… I’m doing a PhD in history. It’s like going on a blind date every week. And never finding the right partner. Thrilling though.”

We continue to talk for a bit, and just after we walk past the medical school, he points to an empty parcel of slightly raised land a few metres ahead of us. It is accessible by stepping stones, barely visible behind a group of cars parked on the road.

“There’s the cemetery”, he says. “You’re lucky, you’re seeing it in all its glory. No painted swastikas today”.

The plot of land where the memorial stands is a yellow-brown hue, reminiscent of dried grass, occupying an area barely measuring five square meters and surrounded by olive trees. I look at their trunks and wonder if those trees were already there before the cemetery was demolished, and how they were lucky to survive since they were not human, *because* they had never been human.

“Isn’t it interesting that Albania was the only European country with more Jews at the end of the Second World War than it had before?”, Denis interrupts my thoughts. “So many found refuge there. Not many people know about it around here, or even elsewhere in Europe”.

“I’ve read somewhere that it helped that we were mostly illiterate, and could not access antisemitic literature”, I offer my cynical interpretation.

“That’s not right though”, Denis seems upset by my remarks. “As if morality depended on reading. I think it’s mainly because of the old tradition of *besa*, the oath of hospitality. You know the story, when the Nazis eventually got to Albania, local authorities were asked to make deportation lists, and they simply refused. They said it was against ancestral customs.

The house of the Albanian belongs to the guest and to God, that sort of thing”.

“Wouldn’t that be a nice rule everywhere”, I say. “I read that tribal hospitality made up for the absence of a functioning police force. I guess it had some advantages during the Holocaust”.

“Well, yes”, he says. “The rule of law is good in theory. In practice it depends on having laws that are actually doing some good”.

Three or four gravestones with the star of David lie on the ground, and at the centre of the plot there is a large menorah, with one side tilted right, touching the ground, almost as if digging into it. To its side, there are two large memorial plaques, one written in Greek and one in English. We both read in silence:

“You’re stepping on sacred ground. You’re stepping on what is left of the largest necropolis of the east. You’re stepping on the place where the Jews of Thessaloniki were buried for centuries. Strong spirits and kind souls of the most vibrant community of the Mediterranean have found their final rest. Their graves spread out high on the hills until 1943, when the forces of evil crushed human substance, but people were not enough. They wanted to kill the memory too. And as they were sending the living to their death, they were shattering the tombs of the dead and scattering their bones. Those buried here died for a second time”.

Can death be a repeat experience? Perhaps that is the challenge with my grandmother, to save her from a second death. Ever since my first visit to the Files’ Authority, I have become obsessed with her life, oscillating between curiosity, frustration and resentment. Her past stands before me like a tough border guard. “What is the purpose of your visit?”, it asks.

Dignity, I continue to repeat in my head. That which sets humans apart from trees and stones. That which makes humans human even when, like my grandmother, they are no more. Dignity. Why did I never think about the past like this when she was still alive, and I could still access it through her? Even when she volunteered stories from her youth in Greece and then Albania, it was like listening to a fairytale, a series of tragic misfortunes culminating in the happy ending of my arrival into the world. I always knew the cast of characters: Ibrahim pasha, Mediha Hanim, Shefikat, Asllan, Xhafer, Doctor Elias. I remember how she’d often wrap her stories up by repeating, “there was a lot of suffering, a lot of suffering”, in the same tone of voice with which she’d say that “there was a lot of rain outside” when she nipped out of the house on a late autumn day. It never occurred to me that these were not *her* stories but mine, not her authentic experience but a pedagogical narrative rearranged for my sake, for the sake of her audience. What was her life, *to her*? Back then, it felt like a collection of facts for which I had no feelings. Now that she’s no longer with us, that she can’t answer any questions, it’s a collection of feelings for which I have no facts.

“Isn’t it funny”, Denis says, that “the words for coffin and archive in Albanian are almost the same? *Arkivol* and *arkiv*, the first to bury the body, the second to bury the soul”.

“To me *arkivol* sounds like some kind of sedating pill”, I say. “When the *arkiv* is inaccessible, keep calm and take *Arkivol*.”

Denis chuckles, kicking away a small stone from the ground. Then he seems to have second thoughts, goes to pick it up where it has landed, and returns it where it was.

“By the way, when was your grandmother born?”, he asks.

“1918”.

“Were they wealthy?”

“For a time”.

“Then maybe you’ll find something in the archives. Just don’t waste your time asking for her specifically. If you know her father’s name, her grandfather’s, any uncles. Basically, they have to be men. I gave up researching women. Women and archives. Good luck with that. You’re better off writing a novel”.

Intermezzo: A Woman from Salonica

“What is reason of visit to archive?”

The question, in stilted English, this time is posed by a middle-aged employee at the Historical Archive of Macedonia, a yellow two-storied interwar villa in neoclassical style that used to originally house the Russian hospital. She wears thick glasses with a gold silver frame, paired with a slender golden watch resembling a bracelet. She has neatly blow-dried blond hair, and sports a red sleeveless top eccentrically adorned with white fur around the neck. Sitting authoritatively on an ergonomic office chair, she's just been summoned by a younger, and seemingly junior, colleague because "she speaks better English". Her back is half turned away from me, as she waits for signs of life to emerge from the large computer screen opposite her.

"I would like to find out more about my grandmother", I say. "She was Albanian but born in Greece".

Mrs White Fur turns to face me, twisting her head a little with a mysterious frown. Her lips are firmly pressed together, like gates to a forbidden thought.

"I gathered some information about her in the archives in Tirana", I hasten to add, "but there were some strange things in the files so I've come to double check in Thessaloniki".

"What strange things?"

Anxiously gripping the tablet where the scans of my grandmother's files are stored, I ask her to give me a moment. I have gone through the files so many times that I know exactly where to scroll for the short "biography" of Leman Ypi. Page 12 of Investigative Judicial File 931 reads:

Leman Ypi was born in Greece in the city of Salonica in the year 1925. She is single, and a Greek citizen. Her father was very rich and died. She only has her mother left and owns a small estate near Thessaloniki. Prior to moving to Albania, Leman was engaged to a lawyer (who was apparently extremely wealthy). The lawyer was killed by Greek partisans in 1945. Leman came to Albania in 1942, together with her mother under the pretext of visiting her relatives. In 1943, they *tried to return to Greece and with the help of [CROSSED] and [CROSSED] went to see lieutenant Jacomoni to ask for permission to leave the country. The lieutenancy informed them that they must wait for an extra month for an official authorisation from Athens. After consulting with her mother, they decided not to travel because the situation in Greece had become troubled, partisan forces had increased and were spread everywhere and travelling became unsafe.* Leman agreed with her fiancee, the lawyer, that they would celebrate their marriage in Albania *and expected him to join her. In 1944, she received a telegram that he had been killed. Today she lives on Bardhyl Street, nr. 42.*

“The information provided in the files I obtained in Albania is very confusing”, I explain. “For example, the year of birth is reported as 1925 in one page, and 1926 in another. But as far as I know she was born in 1918, one year after the fire…”

“There were lots of fires in those days in Thessaloniki *Madame*”, Mrs White Fur interrupts me.

“The rest of the information is very strange too. One of the files claims that her husband, my grandfather, was killed by Greek partisans. It was her father-in-law, his father, that was killed by a bomb”.

She looks up from her computer.

“Someone in the family was killed though, right?”.

“Erm… yes… but not her husband”.

She shrugs as if to suggest I am being too demanding.

“And then…”, I say, sensing her impatience, trying to be concise, “the Albanian files claim that she planned to return to

Greece with her mother, but got stuck because of the war. Again, as far as I know, only her mother got stuck, my grandmother had just married in Albania the… the lawyer who is reported here as her fiancee… and who was Albanian, not Greek…”.

“So what do you want us to do?”, she asks curtly. “We won’t be able to tell you who travelled and who didn’t. It was less complicated in those days. People came and went; they were like birds”.’

There is a short pause. “Could you perhaps help me confirm the date of birth? Or see if there is anything else you can find? Her name and surname are not that common, so there won’t be anyone else of Albanian background who lived in Salonica at the same time. Hopefully it won’t take long…”

She nods in agreement, and I dictate the details, starting with my grandmother’s maiden name, Leman Leskoviku. As I speak, she begins tapping on the computer, her hand movements accompanied by unpromising ones with her head.

“There’s nothing here”, she declares after a while.

“Can you perhaps try her married surname: Leman Ypi?”.

“How do you spell Ypi?”

“Y - P - I”.

Mrs White Fur looks up from the computer, now visibly annoyed. “*Madame*, please. This is a *Greek* archive. The letter Y does not exist in Greek. I can offer you O, or OU, or U. Which you like?”.

“Oh, I see. Can you… can you… perhaps try with each of them?”

She raises her hand, and jingles her golden bracelet-watch, producing a clinking sound.

“Please…?”

She turns towards the computer and begins tapping again, each keystroke more determined than the last.

My phone rings suddenly.

“Mami”, I whisper in Albanian. “No, they haven’t found anything yet. I know they’re in the EU, they still haven’t found anything. What do you mean give her ten euros? It’s not because she wants more, I have no idea how much she wants, she’s not a waitress tending a bar. No, she’s not Albanian either. Well, ok, maybe you should have come… must go now…”.

“I can’t find anything”, Mrs White Fur declares in a peremptory voice.

“But she really was born in Salonica”, I insist. “Only a few blocks away from here, on Sarantaporou Street, in a villa with one hundred canaries, she always told me about the canaries, I even knew a Greek song about it…”.

“Aaaah Sarantaporou”, she says, “where the ghetto was. Was she Jewish? Then you could search the Jewish community archives, they have much better records, you know, because of the Holocaust”.

“She was Muslim. Ottoman elite. Her grandfather was a Pasha. Could we perhaps search with his name and see if anything comes up?”

She shakes her head decisively.

“There won’t be anything from before the liberation”, she replies confidently.

It takes me a moment to understand which liberation she has in mind. My grandmother always referred to 1912, the year Albania declared independence and Ottoman Salonica became officially part of the Greek state as the year of the “invasion”.

“Have you tried the Ottoman cadastre?”, she asks.

I feel like I am on the verge of tear - tears of anger. I have already visited the cadastre, the Thessaloniki municipal registration office, the Kalamaria neighbourhood documentation centre, the French school that houses the archives of the Lycée. It’s as if my grandmother had never existed, except in my words.

“It’s very hard to find women”, Mrs White Fur stands up from her chair, to indicate my time is up. “Even Greek women. I’m amazed you already have so much information”.

“The information is from the people spying on her in Albania during communism”.

“We had fascism”, she retorts, ushering me to the door.

Intermezzo: Surveillance Reports

The surveillance started at 14.30 h on 19/II/1952 on Bardhyl Street, nr. 42. The object (sic) left the house at the specified time and walked through Bardhyl Street, Qemal Stafa, Barricades Street, 28th November, Hamdi Mezezi, Hamdi Toptani. At 15.05h she entered the Education Ministry. At 19.05h, she left the Ministry and walked through New Albania boulevard, and on this road she met Professor P. (crossed) K. (crossed) who lives on Myslum Peza Street. She walked with him through Bajram Curri Street, Four Heroes Street, Thanas Ziko Street and here they stood for fifteen minutes but it was dark and one could not see very well; it is suspected however that they exchanged correspondence. After fifteen minutes they separated saying "goodnight". The object walked through R. Cerova and Bardhyl Street and at 20.30h returned to her house.

[…]

On 22.05. 1952, from 6h to 14h, the object never left the house.

(The Red Cap, The Shengjin Marshes, The Pelivan).

[…]

On 23.03.1952, the object left the house at 7.25 h and walked through the usual streets to go to work without meeting anyone. At 13h, she left the Ministry and walked through Hamdi Toptani Street, Labinoti Street, George Martin Street, Avni Rustemi Square, Hoxha Tasim Street and in the middle of *the road she met M. (crossed) M. (crossed) to whom she spoke a little, after which they parted and the object passed Hoxhe Vokri, Qemal Stafa and Bardhyl Streets then entered her house.*

[…]

On 24.02.1952 from 6h to 14h, the object never left the house.

(*The Tongs, The Pelivan, Shëngjin Marshes*).

[…]

At 15.05 the object left the house on Bardhyl Street and met an old man employed in the Physical Education Committee who was wearing a bracelet and carrying some vegetables and food. After they spoke for two minutes, they parted and the object continued on Bardhyl Street, then Q. Stafa, Riza Cerova, Rapo Hekali, Thanas Ziko streets. She then returned to Qemal Stafa Street, turned on Shenasi Dishnica Street and entered house number 8 where L.(crossed) J.(crossed) and M. (crossed) and Sh.(crossed) live. Here the object spent two hours and five minutes and after leaving, walked on Shinasi Dishnica Street, Q. Stafa, Barricades Street, 28 November where she met a friend and together, they walked about the boulevard […] then they parted.

(*The Rifle, The Cogwheel, The Storm*).

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One of the most exciting discoveries made while trying to piece together my grandmother's life from the files are the collaborators' names: the Red Cap, the Tongs, The Cogwheel, The Willow Branch, The Storm, Wind of March. A combination of nature and technique. I especially like "The

Pelivan", a term that in Albanian is used to indicate a person who is brave, and acrobatic, but also equipped with practical intelligence and adaptive skills. It comes from Ottoman Turkish: Pehlivans were participants in oil wrestling, the world's oldest sporting-competition where adversaries coated in oil grapple with each other in a physical contest. The practice had delighted audiences since the fourteenth century but began to decline in popularity when the Ottoman Empire's wannabe European elites decided to take an interest in the less slippery, crispy white uniforms of tennis and golf. As I rifle through pages and pages of painstakingly collected irrelevant information about my grandmother, I think of the facts of her life as they slip through the hands of collaborators like limbs coated in oil. A "pehlivan" is what a robot could never be.

It's easy to be distracted. The files are sometimes tedious. Long lists of street names, followed by the time in which the "object" was located, like some sort of prehistoric Google map. Occasionally, I feel guilty that as I begin to read, I lose interest in my grandmother's life. Instead, I wonder which, if any, of my descendants might one day search through the large set of online data about me. Communist authorities could only have dreamt of such extensive development in the forces of production.

In the files, my grandmother is described as "the object". There is something paradoxical about an object that is also perceived as a threat. An object is never autonomous, it always requires a subject that can direct it in accordance with a purpose. Leman can direct herself, and *they* (the spies, the party, the politburo) fear the direction she might be about to take. They control her, but in some way, she controls them:

they exist because she exists, they are defined in opposition to her. It's a sort of master-slave dialectic of recognition. Two independent self-conscious agents are engaged in a life and death struggle, push themselves to the limit, and discover that the truth of each lies with the other.

Perhaps Leman's humanity mattered more to the system tracking her preferences than I do to the one tracking mine. She's surveilled by her peers. They observe her, they make a note of her moves, they meticulously record her location. They must care about what she thinks, *specifically*, in the way no company will ever care about me, *specifically*. I am a generic consumer, a cog in a corporate machine, a means to profit. She's still recognised as human by another human. For all the asymmetry in their power, for all the manipulation and control, she remains an end in herself, a subject whose dignity can never be fully destroyed.

"I have known Leman Ypi since the year 1950 when she came to work in the Education Ministry", notes a report filed on her by the Tribune on 12th August 1958. "Prior to her arrival there were only men working in the office, and when she came, the first thing I told her was that it was so nice to have a woman working next to me, and this is how we became friends".

The Tribune sounds like the name of an alternative search engine. Yet, *this* Tribune has pride and shame, courage and fear, thoughts and feelings, and a life of his or her own, a life that is not merely constructed to serve someone else's purposes (though they are perfectly capable of doing that too). The Tribune retains the capacity to doubt, including to doubt themselves. Sometimes they sound supportive: "Often Leman is sad, and when I ask her what’s wrong, *oh*, she says, *you have other people here to lift you up, and I have nobody, just all the heavy burden of the household on my own*”. Sometimes, it reads like a dangerous liaison, maintained at a significant personal cost: “Then she left the Ministry and both her departure and the advice I received to be careful with her reactionary *beyler* background means that I had to loosen my friendship with her”.

I wonder how much my grandmother reciprocated; if she ever felt any affection for her office mate. Occasionally, their conversations become quarrelsome. “During one of our chance meetings”, the Tribune writes, she was asked for a residence permit so that she could be given Albanian citizenship, but she absolutely refused, she was desperate, under no conditions did she want this, and kept saying: “*I have no luck, I will protest*”, without explaining what exactly she would protest about. You are wrong, I said, you are Albanian, that’s your origin. Then, as is her character, short-tempered and cantankerous, she became angry”.

Other times, there is a touch of empathy in the reports: “Talking about the past, she says that her family used to be very rich, but I know her as very proud and boasting. Sometimes, though, she will complain that typing makes her very tired, that she must work outside work hours to be able to earn a living, and that she has already sold all her possessions. I once expressed surprise about this and asked her why she must sell everything, but she simply said she had to eat well - I think she may be ill since another friend spotted her multiple times in the gastroenterology hospital ward”. *Another* friend? Was the Tribune a friend?

On reading the files carefully, it is clear that Leman did not trust them. I wonder if she even suspected her office mate was a collaborator. This, at least, is how I have come to interpret the many inaccuracies found in the files, the fact that she seems to have withheld crucial information, perhaps even deliberately misled her colleague. There is no mention in their conversations of either her young son or her husband, but only brief, vague references to her family in Greece, her dependent mother in Albania, and a lawyer to whom she was once engaged. Perhaps she did not want to draw attention to the fact that she was *still* married to that lawyer, given all that happened to my grandfather shortly after the war. Unlike many of her peers, who ended up divorcing their partners for political reasons, and were promised a trouble-free life as a result, she never severed the links to Asllan. Still, it makes sense that she would hesitate to draw attention to them, to explain *why* exactly she is now left alone with her mother or go into detail about his whereabouts.

The Tribune seems to be sincerely convinced they have a deep insight into my grandmother's life: "Throughout our friendship, we often talked about personal things and her only preoccupation seemed to be to find a husband because she was on her own with her elderly mother".

I smile as I read this, thinking Leman must have been talking about Cocotte, or had decided to adopt the persona of Cocotte, and the Tribune misunderstood. Some of the lines I read seem to apply to her cousin and make me wonder if Cocotte might have been under surveillance too:

"During one of our recent conversations she told me in tears that she had wanted to marry an Italian. […] Later on I asked what happened about the marriage and she simply sighed and said: “my fate”, and I was unable to understand what she had done with the whole citizenship thing”.

If the Tribune had been a bot, there would have been greater clarity in how it processed the information. I am lost in her files like in a labyrinth of sophisms. There is no sign of the photo that went viral on Facebook, even though Çim insists it’s definitely “in the office”, and I must not lose hope. Still, that is now only one of the mysteries I am confronted with. The surveillance reports have an accurate minute-to-minute reconstruction of Leman’s daily movements, but the more I read, the more confusing the bigger picture becomes. There are too many gaps, too many unanswered questions. If I did not recognise aspects of her character in the descriptions, I might even doubt if this is about a life I really know at all.

When I mention this to historians, they smile. It’s the best kept secret about archives, they say: it’s more about what you don’t find, rather than what you do. The silence in the archive is as loud as any voice they manage to capture. This is what makes the few occasions when you discover “the truth” utterly exhilarating: the contrast between a sudden revelation of traces of the past and the more normal expectation of an irreversible absence. Yet it’s a difficult instinct to relate to in a world of instant availability, where we are increasingly unable to cope with loss.

I recently read about a virtual reality tool called “Forever mode”, which enables users to create virtual versions of themselves which surviving relatives can interact with once they are dead. Perhaps I would prefer my grandmother’s digital avatar to the ambiguity of those files. Perhaps I would have trained it (her?) to answer questions about the purpose of her existence, about her moral worth, about what is left from us once we become decomposing flesh.

Secret service archives present their own difficulties. When I ask Vera, the helpful employee of the Files Authority in Tirana, to help me navigate the contradictory information contained in the files, her reply is: "what you see is what you get". Every archivist here understands that documents often contain errors – either because of filing mistakes, or due to overenthusiastic informants providing unverified details, or even because in many cases collaborators are aware that their words could have dramatic repercussions, and try to avoid complicating the lives of their "objects".

There are examples of each of these in the files I scroll through. Sometimes the information is highly compromising. A summary of the surveillance submitted by the Tribune explains that "when Leman is asked by our collaborators why she does not take Albanian citizenship, she replies that this country is not Albania, you'd better ask why you don't take Russian citizenship since nobody here loves their homeland but only works for Stalin". Further down the file, she confesses her concerns: "she told our agent that a man that had just been to visit her in the office was most likely a collaborator since everyone with foreign background is currently under surveillance and he has most likely come to see me, and she became very worried".

Other times, the information submitted alleviates the suspicions. "Talking to a personal friend about Leman Ypi", one operative officer Dhimitër L. reports, "I was told that as far as he knows she is a hard-working woman”. He writes with compassion, even sympathy.

“She tries to improve her earnings as much as she can, and so she takes on extra material for typesetting, and works outside hours”. Further down, a more explicit comment appears: “I have not noticed any suspicious behaviour or any connections to suspicious people”.

Dhimitër L., I wish I could give you a hug. I might not exist, if you’d decided to report something different.

My request for clarification reaches the Files Authority at a particularly inappropriate time, during a scandal involving the country’s President in relation to his past as a member of the communist youth. There are fierce debates even among employees of the archive: some people demand truth at all costs, others say it is essential to ask for his resignation because the mere suspicion of such activity is already a stain on one’s biography. Vera enjoys pointing out that, in the long transition to democracy, that stretches and stretches like some old pants’ elastic, there has been ample opportunity for office-holding politicians to destroy any compromising evidence. It’s already too late, she reckons. To take an interest in the dispute is to confess one’s naivety. Much better to focus on “fighting corruption”. Incidentally, this is also what the President thinks.

It’s quite possible that there are missing documents in my grandmother’s file, that they were unreliable in the first place, or that they were destroyed at some point in the process. I keep thinking about Aristotle: being is made of essential and accidental properties. Here I am, confronted only with the accidents - the essence is slippery, like the body of a Pehlivan.

The essence is never given to me, it is rather sealed in all the trips that led nowhere, the files that I can no longer access, the voices that are lost, the memories that can't be retrieved. Who exactly am I speaking to? Are their testimonies reliable?

Aristotle was right, I think. He was right about essence, the "what it was to be" that is now ephemeral, pure absence, like evil in a world intended to be good. Then it occurs to me that only thirty-one out of about two hundred texts by Aristotle have survived the burning of the library of Alexandria, and that what Aristotle *thought* about essence might well have been in the remaining one hundred and sixty-nine. How do we even know there were two hundred altogether? What if new ones are discovered sometime? Essence would then no longer be in the past but in the future. "What it must become to be".

I ought to return to the present. To the purest digital pile of now all too familiar folders, scans of yellowish, typeset paragraphs ornate with various vice-colonel doodles. The original must smell so foul. But then who can really say?

17

Another Humanitarian Intervention

The only blood Leman remembered from the Nazi occupation of Albania was her own. She went into labour on a Saturday evening at the end of August 1943, only a couple of hours after Robinson had stopped by their house to invite Asllan to play tennis at Nallbani courts. Her husband had said he could not leave Leman alone since she was already past her pregnancy due date and asked his friend to join him for a game of chess instead.

The two men were having one of those typical conversations between chess-players that take place between sessions, made of short questions and answers punctuated by long silences, then seamlessly picked up again at the end of each round.

Asllan had not seen Robinson for a while. The Englishman had been busy helping coordinate a meeting between communists, royalists and nationalists that had just been held in Mukje, a village near Tirana. He was in an unusually good mood. The Albanians, he reported, had decided “to not act *like* Albanians for once”. They had managed to overcome their divisions and establish a joint liberation committee, resolving to fight together until the end of the war and settle their political disagreements in a future postwar election. Asllan was cheerful too: he had been reading about the Allies’ operation in Sicily, and about Mussolini’s deposition by Marchal Badoglio, and felt confident the war was at a turning point.

Leman sat on a dark leather armchair, knitting a little yellow woollen hat for the baby, passively absorbing snippets of conversation. She vaguely heard Asllan ask some technical, legal questions about the Mukje agreement and which borders of Albania the British might be prepared to recognise in the event of winning the war. She also heard Robinson say that the Brits had committed to offering the Albanian resistance continuous financial and military support until the fascists were defeated.

Then, in a strange twist of her mind, she started to think about her own upcoming struggle, and how alone she felt. Her mother, who had come to stay with them, had developed a nasty cough and chest pain, and was continuously bedbound. Cocotte had declared she would only visit several months later since newborn crying made her panic; apparently it reminded her of people’s screams during a fire. As to Asllan, his solidarity took the form of an ongoing translation project of Olympe de Gouges’ *Declaration of the Rights of Women*, but he hardly knew how to crack an egg. They teach you so many things in life, she was thinking, but never how to look after a child. How am I supposed to know? Then she felt a tinge of guilt for even raising the question in her head.

She tried to follow the conversation and heard her husband mention his father’s name once or twice but could only grasp single words - king, republic, socialism, agrarian reform. They floated in her mind like tiny paper boats before disintegrating in a children’s play tub. Her cramps were now more frequent and intense, and at one point she felt as if she was suffocating. Her body became increasingly a distraction, and though she tried to avoid turning into a distraction for the two men, in the end she had to give up. When Asllan stood up to fetch another bottle of wine, she followed him and whispered something in his ear.

“We’ll see if the …. if the Yugoslavs who run the Albanian communist party, will give up Kosovo”, he suddenly turned to Robinson. Two drops of sweat had formed on his forehead, and he had become a little paler than usual. “Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur Robinson”, he added awkwardly. He was trying to find a way of being diplomatic. “My wife… I fear we must leave the house… my wife is about to give birth”.

Not quite. Leman’s labour stretched on relentlessly for more than thirty excruciating hours. In between bouts of vomiting and constant haemorrhaging, she roared like she never thought she was capable of. She later said it reminded her of Mediha Hanim’s mad, uncontrollable shrieks when she discovered her daughter had taken poison. Lying on a hospital bed in agony, covered in sweat, as she clenched her nails on the iron rails of the bed, struggling to release the life inside her, she also thought she had some kind of poison in her womb. She became convinced she was about to die. The idea, strangely, did not upset her, she simply wanted it to be over. There’s nothing dignified about birth, she later said, just as there isn’t about death. Perhaps it meant, quite simply, that dignity has nothing to do with nature.

The baby was born at dawn, just as the sun was rising behind Mount Dajti, filling the ward with a bright light that made the large stains of blood on the white bedsheets look threedimensional. They called him Xhafer, like his recently deceased grandfather; for short, Zafo. Zafo was in good health, with curly hair, and chubby cheeks, and turned out to be an unusually contented baby. Every now and then, the roar of tanks on the street and thunder of war planes circling the sky would startle him, and he looked as if he was about to cry but changed his mind. He stared at his mother with a kind of mysterious - half-worried, half-bored - expression that reminded her of those misplaced cherubs at the bottom of Raphael's Sistine Madonna. He had, if not dignity, at least traces of grace.

Leman left the hospital a few days later, healthy but barely able to walk from the stitches. As their small Fiat Topolino slowly crossed boulevard Mussolini, two Nazi officers sitting on a motorcade were driving parallel to their vehicle. One of them noticed she held something in her lap, and pointed it out to his colleague. Asllan, who was sitting next to his wife at the back of the car, instinctively covered Zafo's face with his hand. The motorcade slowed down, but when the officers sitting in the front seat realised the suspicious object was a baby, they waved and smiled.

"Gruss Gott" they greeted him.

He nodded back.

"Inshallah you'll meet Him first", he whispered in Albanian.

"Was he Austrian?", Leman asked when the officers had disappeared. "Don't the Germans say "Guten Tag?"

"It depends, but it's true they've mostly sent Austrians to take over from the Italians".

"Like in the Great War", she said, rearranging the baby's hat. "Vittorio Veneto all over again, but in Albania".

"They think Albanians love Austrians because so many studied there", Asllan replied, but she wasn't listening. Zafo was stirring in her lap, and slowly woke up from his sleep. She stroked his cheek with a smile.

"He has this expression, as if he wants to correct me all the time", she said to Asllan.

"You're like your *papa* aren't you? You just want to keep everyone in check. Don't look at me like that", she spoke softly, smelling his baby neck. "It will be over soon, don't worry. Once upon a time", she continued, "when I was a tiny baby, like you, there was also a big war, the most terrible war there has ever been, and all these big tough guys, the Kaiser, the Sultan, were all fighting each other. Their lands were so vast, and millions of people had been living there for ages, and, you know, nobody ever thought they could ever disappear, and yet… one day… well, it was over, they were all gone, just like that, pah!"

She clicked her fingers in the air, making the baby startle. He had a pained expression, as if he was about to burst into tears.

"Hey, did I scare you?", she said, panicking slightly.

She tried to rock him, but the motion made her feel a sharp pain between her legs, and she winced. "Don't be afraid. They left a mess when they were gone, and we're still trying to figure out who belongs where, and how to treat each other, but hey… hey… now you're really crying … please, please… oh dear…".

Looking increasingly distressed, she took a deep breath to compose herself. “It’s enough that your *maman* and *papa* are scared… please don’t cry… You must show us how to be brave, ok?”

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The return home coincided with Leman’s transitioning to that alternative time zone that new mothers know so well, where day and night blur into one, while thoughts and actions are structured only by the needs of their infants. Everything else becomes a matter of indifference, as it turned out to be for her. This attitude is captured, if slightly exaggerated, on page 9 of Investigative Judicial File 931, which delves into Leman Ypi’s “stance during the German occupation”. As yet another “short biography” provided by one “vice-head of the surveillance branch of the Ministry of Interior”, captain M. M. explains, “as far as we know, she neither sympathised with the Albanian liberation movement, nor helped it”.

As far as *I* know, in the same weeks in which the German army completed their take-over of Albania, Leman was focused on trying to breastfeed. Contrary to what she had been told, she discovered there was nothing natural about it. She still moved around the house with the help of a walking stick, and though she had been warned that the loss of blood during the birth would complicate the recovery, she became increasingly anxious and depressed. Was she making enough milk to keep the baby alive? Did her son cry for lack of food, or tiredness, or was she being rejected? Would she ever be able to walk again unaided?

“The body knows what to do”, her mother tried to console her, “but if you worry, the milk won’t come”. To her it seemed a strange idea that she should simply sit, or preferably lie, there, waiting for the body to act in accordance with a purpose from which the mind must necessarily be excluded. She struggled to accept that nature would follow its course, if only she entertained fewer doubts. Wasn’t it supposed to be the other way round, that the mind disciplined the body? Don’t doubt. Be without thinking. Therefore, don’t be. Keep calm and carry on. It all sounded like war propaganda. What if it didn’t work out, who would then be responsible, who would pay the cost?

Mustn’t trivialise war, she thought. War is noble - what honour is there in making milk? Still, there seemed to be dishonour in *not* making it. What did she care about the fight of others? Communists, fascists, liberals, what did they have to offer her? They were all busy burying the old world, digging up the new one, and she was busy being excluded from both, caught up in her own fight, the one nobody seemed to notice. She sometimes wondered what Shefikat would have advised. Shefikat, if you had been a mother, you would have never killed yourself. Shefikat, you’re such a deserter. She was constantly tired, constantly irritable. Perhaps they were right, she really ought to stop thinking and simply be, like a plant in a pot, like a cactus. Perhaps she simply ought to be braver: a soldier of milk.

Asllan came in and out of the room, and often found her wiping away tears. He tried to comfort her, quoting back her mother, but she ignored him, so he held the baby for a little while, and tried to distract her with the latest news: “Badoglio surrendered”. “The Italians have signed an armistice with

Eisenhower". "The Allies are broadcasting messages to encourage Italian soldiers to join the resistance". Sometimes Leman took an interest. Sometimes she gazed out the window with an empty expression.

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The German army completed their occupation of Albania with characteristic efficiency, if a little apologetically. It was unfortunate, one of the generals in charge declared, that they had to enter the country at all, and without even first knocking on the door. The intervention, they explained, was necessary to control the airspace and hold on to key roads, coastal access points, and strategic sites abandoned by Italy, connecting German troops already stationed in Greece and Yugoslavia. Earlier in the summer, the Wehrmacht had encountered significant resistance in the South, where Albanian partisan guerrillas attacked German convoys en route to Greece. The revenge operation resulted in a massacre of civilians in the border village of Borova: ten Albanians (including women and children) for every German soldier killed. Yet, as the various divisions of the Jäger regiment started coalescing in Tirana, increasingly exhausted and demoralised from the pressure they now faced all over Europe, they were especially eager to avoid further fighting, transferring as much authority as possible.

One day, Asllan brought home a bunch of leaflets that he had found at the bottom of their stairs and handed it to Leman. The city was covered in them, he said, like price tags assigned to every important building. "There are also a couple of leaflets from the Allies", he pointed out, "but they're in Greek and Serbian. Good luck to the genius who thought we'd warm to that".

Leman glanced at the pile with glazed eyes, then returned it to her husband indifferently. He insisted on reading the Nazi ones out loud: “The German government salutes Albanians for their bravery in resisting Italy. Albania is now an independent country, and the *Führer* is committed to helping it defend its enlarged borders and territorial integrity”.

“Enlarged borders”, he repeated. “What do you say to that?”

She yawned.

It was only several days later, as she returned from her first evening walk outside with the baby, that Leman noticed the Albanian flag waving from one of the government buildings now looked different. The fasces that caged in the two headed-eagle had disappeared, as had Victor Emanuel’s coat of arms, replaced by Skanderbeg’s helmet. The German government had framed its intervention as lending Albanians a hand to help them in the struggle for independence from Italy, offering support to defend the country from the communist threat, and keeping only the troops required to deter the Allies. They abrogated the old fascist laws, rescinded the status of Albania as co-belligerent to Rome, and recognised the country as “relatively” sovereign and “relatively” neutral.

“A new category in international law”, Asllan remarked sarcastically. “It will be enshrined in the constitution. Who knew the Germans could be so good at faking it”.

They were walking up their street, having just returned from the market, and Asllan was helping her push the pram, when she spotted Cocotte from a distance.

“What happened to you?”, Cocotte almost screamed with alarm when she noticed her cousin walked with great difficulty. “I thought you went to a maternity hospital, and you’ve come back on a limp as if you had a skiing accident!”

“Steep mountain”, Leman said approaching her. “Irreverent, hard to conquer. What about you, I thought you had announced you weren’t going to visit until the first birthday…”.

She gave her a hug but a vague expression of reproach had not left her face.

“Well, I’m not staying very long. Just thought you might like some *yaprak* I made”. Cocotte glanced at the baby suspiciously from the corner of her eye, and when she became convinced Zafo would not cry immediately, asked if she could hold him.

“I’m your tante Cocotte”, she was saying to him, as Asllan helped his wife climb the stairs. “Don’t you dare touch my new mascara with those snotty hands or we will no longer be friends!”

“Where do you see his snotty hands?”, Leman asked offended.

“I’m just warning him about the future. Talking about the future, I have given up on Remo, *il marito italiano*. There are no more Italian men left, except for the rabble that ended up joining Hoxha and his friends in the mountains”.

She noticed Asllan frown as he unlocked the door.

“Well, they *are* all rabble, it’s Robinson who said it. I saw him the other day, apparently the communists have broken the agreement with the nationalists, the nationalists have made friends with the Nazis, and, as a result of all that, the rabble are the only ones left for the British to support. By the way, guess who sends his best wishes?”, she turned towards her cousin. “Herr Gustav, I met him by chance at a soiree in Hotel Dajti the other evening”.

“Is he back?”, Leman asked.

“Is he back? He never left! He’s a businessman, remember, he’s in the vanguard. Money marches faster than the Jäger divisions. The more people fight, the more they smoke. I can’t believe Avni Bey sold him all his tobacco shares! He would have been a millionaire after all this, the Germans are getting all the contracts. Mind you, they insist on *making* contracts with us, which is more than the Italians ever did… they could just take the bloody stuff, it’s not like anyone would stop them”.

Then Cocotte lowered her eyes slightly guiltily.

“Gustav asked if he can visit. To… to see the …”, she murmured, pointing at the baby.

“I don’t think so”, her cousin interrupted, before she could finish the sentence.

“You know he is very apologetic, he told me he does not agree with all that his government is doing. It’s a war he said… their people are dying too. And remember… he did his best with… the whole issue of the doctor …”, Cocotte continued, slightly embarrassed.

“No”, Leman repeated, this time raising her voice.

“Alright, alright, don’t be angry with me. I’ll pretend I forgot to tell you. In any case”, she turned towards Asllan, “he is the only German I’ve met so far. The rest are all Austrian”.

“I heard”, Asllan replied, “the ambassador is Austrian too. We’ve made progress with our status”, he added ironically. “We’re not a colony anymore. The highest authority in town is his humble excellency, ambassador Neubacher. Apparently he used to be mayor of Vienna”.

“I love Wienerschnitzel!”, Cocotte exclaimed. “And Waltz, and Kaiserschmarrn! And I must say the Austrian officers I’ve met here are exquisitely polite!”

“Apparently they’re trying to court Leman’s old boss, the most liberal prime minister we ever had”, Asllan commented, “they brought him back from his Italian internment. He will lead the regency council”.

“That’s quite a coup!”, Leman said with interest.

“Indeed.” Asllan was delighted she was taking part in the conversation. For the last few weeks, he had felt as if she lived not just in a different time zone, but in a different country. “You remember how he called on all your scientist friends who studied in Vienna to become ministers. People still think that was the best government we ever had”.

“I remember when he was broadcasting messages against Mussolini”, Cocotte mused, “he had such an attractive voice. When he called on Albanians to grab their revolvers, it was so thrilling. Even I was ready to fight …”

“Now they will say the Nazis gave us freedom”, Asllan became pensive. “It’s all become a mess again. What did Robinson call the communists? The rabble? I strongly suspect the rabble will have the last word”.

Gustav only made contact once with Leman in Tirana, at the very end of his stay. He had arranged to meet her in a villa situated just off Royal Street, one of the few parts of the city shielded from the increasingly bloody fights between partisan and Nazi units. The house, recently built in neoclassical style, belonged to an Albanian diplomat married to a certain Madame Eleonora, a mediocre pianist but talented socialite, whose exquisite Chopin-themed soirees would regularly delight Tirana's elites.

Leman was reluctant to join him, but decided to go at the last minute, after Cocotte explained he had insisted that he had something urgent to communicate. She wondered if the choice of meeting place was driven only by reasons of safety. She knew well where the house was, but had never been part of Madame Eleonora's famed cultural evenings, mainly because her routine as a young mother had changed, but also because she refused to socialise with "Goethe in a swastika", as she described the Nazi officers regularly invited to the house concerts. Nor had Asllan ever warmed to Eleonora's husband: a dull law graduate whom he knew as a student and who had been spotted in the last few months playing ping-pong with the German ambassador while secretly meeting Allies' representatives trying to convince them of Albania's neutrality in the war. Ridiculous obviously, Asllan thought, but since the Germans went to great lengths to convey the impression they did not interfere in Albania's domestic affairs, the man had succeeded - if not in persuading intelligence officers, then at least in sowing confusion among them.

"I tell you", Asllan would confess to Robinson at the end of their long regular discussions, "you say you'll fund anyone who will *exclusively* fight the Nazis - old fortune tellers who read the bottom of Turkish coffee cups are more reliable than the instructions I hear you get from the War Office. And all those poor British soldiers that are now parachuted in the mountains to help the guerrilla, no wonder they are a little disoriented. The Nazis still court the nationalists, the Allies are suspicious of the monarchists, the Yugoslavs direct the communist resistance, who can make sense of it?"

Robinson nodded pensively. "Perhaps someone ought to attend Madame Eleonora's parties", he replied, "to find out if there's anyone out there we can trust to actually help us fight the Nazis".

Yet in the months that followed, the Wehrmacht's losses in Bulgaria and Romania changed the balance of power to the benefit of the Allies. German military headquarters in Belgrade received instructions to start the withdrawal of troops from the Balkans so as to avoid being trapped between advancing Soviets and Yugoslav partisans. Many members of the infantry divisions, often deserters or prisoners of war captured in the Soviet Union, started to defect to enemy lines. On his way to meeting Leman, Gustav encountered three soldiers in Nazi uniform whom he asked if the road was clear: it turned out they were Tajik, Uzbek and Kazakh respectively and they confessed they had less trouble understanding the Turkish-speaking old men who sheltered partisans in the mountains than his questions in German. He shook his head and marched on, wondering if he'd just met prospective deserters. They will surrender their weapons to either the British or the partisans, whoever they happened to stumble upon first, he thought to himself.

There was an eerie atmosphere in Eleonora's house when he arrived. The day was wet and cold, and a strong wind blew through the windows deprived of curtains. The owners had fled the city earlier that week, part of the same convoy as the high-ranking SS officials whom they invited to perform poems by Goethe and Schiller during their cultural soirees. For days, the partisans had continued to advance and were now storming the capital's radio station. Rumours of an imminent Nazi collapse continued to spread like gun smoke.

Gustav stood waiting in the middle of the salon, in the same spot once occupied by the shining dark Steinway piano. A couple of workmen rushed in and out dragging a few items of furniture - a reclining chair, a small green pouf, a matching velvet sofa - their expression half bored, half angry, as if they resented missing out on the real action unfolding elsewhere in the city. Every now and then, one of them would deliberately smash furniture against the wall leaving a mark on the stucco, then turn to stare at Gustav with a provocative expression that said: "yes, the wood is now damaged, what are you going to do about it?".

He tried to ignore them, his back to the main entrance, fixated on the large silver-framed looking-glass that still hung on the wall - the only remaining trace of the salon's former glory. He was inspecting his bald patch when Leman's face suddenly appeared in the reflection. She looked exhausted but still attractive, an unclaimed war spoil. He walked towards her with open arms as though inviting her into an embrace, but when she stepped back with a sharp, resistant gesture, his arms fell to his sides, like a mythological creature—half bird, half human—struggling to take flight.

“Look at this place”, he spoke softly, greeting her with a bow. “We were here listening to Schubert’s “Du bist die Ruh” only a month or so ago. There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen, a Bolshevik said. They’re good at generalisations, you have to grant them that…”.

“Monsieur Gustav…”, Leman responded with a vague nod of the head.

“A shame you never saw the house furnished. Madame Eleonora used to throw such wonderful, memorable parties”, he continued. “Poor thing, she sobbed inconsolably when she had to leave, she did not want to abandon her things, the piano especially. At least now she is safe in Italy - they all are”.

Leman looked at him with a vague expression of reproach.

“Monsieur Gustav”, she said, “it’s been a long time since we last saw each other. At my eighteenth birthday party, if I’m not mistaken”.

“She is safe, yes”, Gustav repeated, more interested in making his point than catching up with Leman. “I wish I could say the same about you. That is why I wanted to meet”.

“About my safety?”, Leman asked perplexed.

“And your family’s”.

She felt a shiver down her spine, and instinctively clutched her small diamond necklace as if seeking protection from a talisman. He was making her feel nervous. She remembered the first time she had met him, as she sat with Shefikat reading Madame de Stael in their living room, and he showed up in their house carrying a forged Ottoman dagger, asking how much Dafne's carpet would cost.

"My family… we… we are coping", she said slightly defensively. There was a short pause. "I would worry more if we were German like yourself".

Immediately, she regretted she had not found a more appropriate remark to make. It disturbed her to notice that despite not having seen Gustav for all those years, the image she retained of him was identical to the one she was now confronted with. She felt the same awkwardness, the same looming threat in his presence.

"Oh, I will be alright", Gustav replied. "My business is doing well. People will always smoke. But you…", he hesitated briefly. "If I were you, I would not trust your British friends".

"The Allies will win the war", Leman replied, this time with much greater conviction.

"The Allies, yes. Not you".

She became impatient. He had the same sly look, the same confident air, the same arrogant behaviour that had provoked the contempt of Shefikat all those years before, she thought. And the same indifference to the evident discomfort of the person across him, perhaps even a hint of satisfaction in knowing he was making her feel uneasy.

He pulled out a small silver box from his pocket, lit up a cigar and muttered something, at first only to himself, spoken through clenched lips, then more clearly.

“The Allies will win”, he repeated. “Not you. You will be carried off by the new eagles”.

“The eagles?” She became pale. “I don’t understand you”.

“Well”, he continued observing one of the workmen who had now come to collect the mirror, “there’s nothing strange about the fact that lambs resent large birds of prey: but that is no reason to blame large birds of prey for carrying off the little lambs. It’s the way the world goes. Anything else is fantasy, it’s delusion … ”

“I’m not sure I follow”, she interrupted him.

“You will soon, let me finish”, he seemed to become impatient. “It’s just as absurd to ask strength *not* to express itself as strength, *not* to result in the desire to overthrow, crush, become master, as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength. The Communists will defeat us”, he paused when he said “us”, and looked at her as if to check her reaction, “they’re already kicking the army out with British help. A convoy in retreat was blown up in Kosovo. One of the women was pregnant, I know you recently had a baby. As you can see, we… we…”

He paused again as he said “we”, continuing to fix her. “We are not the only barbarians”.

Leman breathed deeply but remained silent.

“In any case”, he continued, “the future of Albania will be in the hands of its people. Last month the Communists established a provisional government. You will have heard, I am sure. They’ll be recognised as the legitimate representatives of the Albanian nation, if not them who else? There is no government in exile, and they have already reneged on all the previous government‘s legal commitments”.

“Well, there will be free elections”, she whispered, almost to reassure herself.

“And who do you think will win?”, he rebutted.

“We… we will have democracy”.

“I think you are mistaken, mademoiselle, pardon, madame”, he said. “You will have the dictatorship of the proletariat. Except you don’t have much of a proletariat here, so you will have the dictatorship of the peasants, the brigands, the mountain rebels, the plebs, the slaves who have been comforted with the grand-sounding name of “dignity of labour” for the misery of their lives, the hunger, the cold, the diseases, the flees who sucked their blood, the infants who died in their cots, all while the rest of you, of *us* really, were skiing and lounging at the beach. Their time is coming. They will have made a note of who opposed them, who doubted their commitment, who humiliated them, who scorned them with their money, with their culture, with their French, who did not make the same sacrifices. And they will also remember who looked upon them condescendingly, who threw them a crust of bread to chew on as if they were dogs, expecting to be thanked. The lambs will become eagles and they will do what eagles do when they are hungry, find their prey. The problem of the good is connected to resentment, there is no other way. Only predators that carry off lambs, and lambs that later become predators. Anyone in the middle will simply have to go. Anyone. That includes you".

"Why us?", Leman protested, shaking her head. "When the war is over", she insisted, "everyone will vote. There will be a new democratic constitution, new laws, and a proper social reform, with a proper representation of workers. We have always been on their side".

"You won't get to decide on whose side you have been", Gustav said. "*They* will call the shots. Remember my words. They'll have the final say".

"Nobody will carry us away", Leman protested. "Asllan knows General Enver Hoxha well. They were together in the Popular Front. They fought for the same causes, only their methods differ…"

"You think you can tell lambs apart from birds of prey?", he interrupted her. Then he thought a little. "I understand if you don't believe me. I know we think differently about these matters. And I have not come to offer you a lecture. I've come to offer a way out".

He pulled out a letter from his pocket. "The details are here. You ought to leave Albania before it's too late. You can bring your husband and young son with you. Unfortunately, I cannot arrange for your mother to come. Perhaps Avni Bey will take care of it, though I doubt he will manage. She will unfortunately have to stay behind".

"Why are you making me this offer?", she asked.

"The answer is not difficult", he replied. "Because you are in danger. There is a more complicated story, which I have been mulling over, but this is not the place to elaborate, nor do we have the time. To cut it short, it seems to me that your decision to move to Albania from Salonica was, yes, a proud young woman's decision, keen to assert her independence from her parents but also not unrelated to what happened to your aunt all those years ago. I've been reflecting in the last few days. It was my birthday, I turned sixty. There's so much death around, and the more death there is, the more one is reminded of the dead: my mother, my father, and I also for some reason came to think of Mademoiselle Shefikat, of how young and beautiful she was. One can never avoid death, that is life. Death, the thought of death, accompanies us like an old friend“.

He paused briefly.

”In any case”, he continued, “I may have played a part in your decision to come to Albania. I hope you will excuse me for saying this but it may turn out to have been the wrong decision. I would like to help you reverse it, if you will allow it of course, before it is too late. I have contacts that will help you flee to Italy, should you wish to leave Albania. I will see to it that you make it out safely, that you join Madame Eleonora and her family, whom I also helped”.

Leman felt her eyes darken, she searched for a chair with her eyes but since the salon was completely empty, she went to lean against a wall.

“Madame Eleonora… flee? But we're not collaborators”, she muttered. “Why would we want to leave?” She thought for a moment, gathered her strength and turned to Gustav.

“Are you feeling guilty?”, she asked, trying to sound firm.

"Guilty?" The question took him by surprise. "We have an interesting word for guilt in German: *Schuld*. And it is linked to *Schulden*, debt: battering and bargaining, buying and selling, exchanging one thing for another, in other words what I do for a living, making money, as simple as that. No doubt with 'guilt' you have something more noble in mind, something to do with responsibility, perhaps what you might call a moral conscience, connected to ideas of duty, to a sense of good and bad that can be established… how shall I put it… through….". He paused for a moment and looked at Leman as if expecting her to finish the sentence. "Through reflection… You may even think only us humans are capable of reflection, and that's what makes us special".

Leman closed her eyes, and now heard the echo of Gustav's voice reverberate through the empty room.

"Guilt… responsibility… moral conscience…", the words kept bouncing off the walls like the bullets of a plastic toy gun. He came closer.

"If your question is whether I have a moral conscience, the answer has to be no. I don't think of morality in that way. As far as I'm concerned, goodness, justice, humanity, they're just words, the words of resentment, the thoughts needed to express the victims' feelings of frustration, the unbearable sense of being stuck. They're elevated to sound noble, dignified, as if there was anything special about us, anything that sets humans apart from all the other animals".

One of the two workmen walked into the room to collect a pile of cardboards abandoned in a corner.

Gustav followed him with his eyes as he wrestled with the pile. “No, no, I don’t think of morality in that way”, he said. “All there is is anger, the revenge of the weak, the return of the oppressed, the lambs who will one day become birds of prey. Everything is a debt, everything has a price. I’m not interested in reflecting on any of that, or changing it, that would be cheating, as if I had something better on offer. Only action matters, not intention. I hate empty promises, but I hate the very word, promise, even more. My contacts are in this letter. Everything is explained in detail. If you decide to take up the offer, let me know”.

He straightened his collar, put on his hat and stared at himself one last time in the second mirror. The delivery men entered the room signalling they intended to remove it, so he had to stand briefly to one side to clear their passage. When he reached the door, a new thought seemed to strike him and he turned towards Leman.

“I forgot something important”, he said. “You have until tomorrow afternoon. I’ll be gone after that. It will be too late”.

19

The Future of Democracy

Leman had no time to reflect on Gustav's proposal. The road back to her flat had suddenly become so dangerous, she had to constantly watch where she was walking. As she made her way down Royal Street, she noticed the barricades at the end: mattresses, tables and chairs, kitchen utensils, garden equipment, even a tweed coat balanced precariously on the top resembling a man bent in prayer. Upon reaching Boulevard Mussolini, the sound of gunshots grew closer, forcing her to retrace her steps and find an alternative route.

When she was nearly home, she saw a body lying at the end of her road, surrounded by a pool of blood. The figure, more a boy than a man, couldn't have been more than sixteen or seventeen. His blood-soaked uniform made it impossible for Leman to tell if he was a Nazi or a partisan. Deciding it didn't matter, she walked purposefully toward him, determined to check if he needed help. His face was pale and stiff like marble, his mouth half open as if death had caught him by surprise. Yet his body still made tiny convulsive movements, as if his head and his limbs were independent from each other—one clinging to life, the other resigned to death. She bent down instinctively, picked up a fragment of brick from the ground, and put it in her pocket.

When she arrived at her flat, pale and shaking, Leman couldn't discuss Gustav's proposal with Asllan right away. Robinson had stopped by with one of his friends, a young British liaison officer named Eliot Watrous, who had recently moved to Tirana from Bari to lead the Special Operations Albanian section. They too had been caught in crossfire in the neighbourhood and were waiting for the one-hour window between sunset and curfew to slip away unnoticed.

“If we leave now, the communists might target us,” Watrous was explaining to Asllan when Leman arrived. “They will, of course, say it happened by mistake.”

“Your friend Hoxha sent a formal note suggesting we are no longer welcome,” Robinson added.

Asllan scratched his head. “But your guns are?”.

“Not if they’re also supplying Zog’s loyalists in the North. He was absolutely adamant that any weapons we give to the monarchists will be used to kill partisans, not Nazis. Who can tell if he’s right? In any case, it’s too late now. Kupi, the Zogist leader, asked for help to be evacuated. We were expecting instructions from London, but apparently, he couldn’t afford to wait longer and went on an Italian boat. Even Churchill has now heard of Hoxha’s exploits. Do you know what he said to Eden about King Zog? ‘Another European monarch down the drain!’”

“To be fair, he was already on his way down the drain when you didn’t recognize an Albanian government in exile,” Asllan pointed out, bringing out a few glasses of cognac. “I can’t say I am sorry. The future of Albanian democracy does worry me, though…”

“Asllan, you are the only person in the world who worries about the future of democracy in the middle of a war,” Robinson laughed.

“The future?” Leman quipped. She sounded irritated and tired. “Did it ever have a past?”

Robinson gave her one of his suspicious stares, but she did not stay to hear the answer. She went to check on the baby who was sleeping, then stopped to see how her mother was doing in the bedroom next to him. Ismet Hanim had been ill for several weeks, with sharp stomach pain accompanied by bleeding. She had lost so much weight that her body now looked like a leaf pressed in a child’s herbarium. The doctors strongly suspected it was cancer.

Leman thought about how she’d almost tuned out when Gustav explained they wouldn’t be able to escape Albania bringing along her mother. The mere thought of leaving Ismet behind made her feel ashamed. How could she do that, knowing that she was the reason her mother had ended up bedbound in Tirana? How could he even imagine her capable of it? She shook her head as if chasing away a fastidious fly. Of course, he would think that, he never knew what it meant to have a parent. And how you become responsible for them as they grow elderly and frail. To him, it was all bartering and bargaining, he had no concept of commitment, no sense of obligation. Only survival, the bare fact of survival, the drive to exist at any price.

When she returned to the living room, she was offered a glass of cognac but declined. She sat in an armchair in the corner of the room knitting a sweater for Zafo while absorbing snippets of conversation about postwar settlement. She couldn’t shake the image of the pale-faced soldier she had encountered earlier, abandoned on a side of the road, teetering between life and death like a street sign on a bombed-out wall. There will be no postwar settlement for him, she wanted to tell them. Then she wondered if this was too narrow a thought, perhaps being alive was not the only thing that mattered. “Sometimes we’re dead even when we’re alive, and we’re more alive when we are dead”, she remembered Shefikat saying the night before her wedding. What choice had he made? Or would the choice be made for him by others, those ascribing meaning to his death?

You won’t be forgotten - she thought she was comforting herself, by way of comforting him. Your name will be immortalised, children will learn about your deeds, your heroic sacrifice will set an example for others. Unless… unless… you were one of them, one of the others, defending the other side. In which case, only your mother will cry for you, only she will visit your empty bedroom and stand by the doorstep in silence at night. Only she will wake up and sit on the table where, as a child, you used to draw all those cars, planes, and tanks. Only she will wonder why there is not even a grave for you.

Instinctively, she plunged her hand in the pocket of her trousers and touched the small red brick she had collected on the ground. Not even a brick, she thought. Not even a pretend-stone like those Doctor Elias had carried with him all the way from Salonica.

“We tried to press the Huns to surrender in Tirana”, Major Watrous interrupted her thoughts, “but they insisted the commander in chief was away and they couldn’t make a decision without him. We had a lot of back and forth with the partisans, we promised we would support from the air if needed, and then bang, they just went for it. You’ve got to admire them: when they fight, they fight. They're giving them hell all the way from Ohrid, chasing them, closing in from all sides. I wouldn't want to be withdrawing my troops under those circumstances".

"There have also been hundreds of arrests in Tirana", Robinson added, "I have to say, not all collaborators. The prisons are full. The properties of people who fled have been requisitioned. And of course, there have been a number of trials - well, people's trials".

"See, this is a problem", Asllan said, "A people's trial without proper courts… that is very disturbing. And who exactly represents the state in this case? I assume your answer cannot still be "whoever fights the Nazis", now that the Nazis are almost gone. Moreover, I'm not against requisitions in principle, but not without some sort of compensation. As for contracts, well, there is the interesting jurisprudential question of their value given the nature of legal transition from wartime Albania to a postwar settlement…."

Robinson looked at him quizzically, as if to question whether this was the right time to contemplate these issues. Asllan paused and thought for a moment. He suddenly remembered his discussion with the student Enver, now General Colonel Hoxha, that time when both were in Paris, and he had tried to help his friend pay his rent to the French landlady. And Enver had preferred to jump out of the window instead. "Asllan", he had said "only you are obsessed with contracts, *mon ami.* But you forget that every contract is the result of violence…"

"Still, one can't act arbitrarily like that", Asllan now pointed out, as if he were continuing the conversation not with the

British officer sitting in front of him smoking a cigar, but with his former student self.

“It is getting very complicated for us”, Major Watrous changed the topic, “everyone knows that to support only the partisan resistance is to surrender Albania to the Russians. Sadly, we’re already busy with Greece - the commies are very strong there. We will support democracy of course. As to an armed intervention by the Allies, I doubt it will happen here”.

Watrous spoke French with some difficulty but was eloquent and confident when he turned to English. At first, Leman thought he had an American accent, but he had grown up in Johannesburg: his mother was from New Zealand and his father an American lawyer in charge of African contracts for the Texas Oil Company. He had moved to London as a child and studied at Westminster School. Leman was not surprised to discover he was leading the Albanian section at only twenty-two: he displayed all the proverbial self-assurance of a British public-school graduate. He had seamlessly stepped into the role after the untimely death of Leake, a former headmaster of Dulwich College, killed during an operation in a Southern village, on the very day he was due to return to their headquarters in recently liberated Bari. Leman pondered if what was most striking about Watrous was his undeniable talent or his confidence. He spoke fluently, was quick witted, and above all, generous with his smile - a broad smile reminiscent of those Hollywood celebrities chosen to star in movies that always end well.

“We actively encourage the formation of a Social democratic party, with people of integrity, individuals who can oppose the communists from a position of moral strength - people like yourself, nobody suspected of collaboration. We will of course, do our best to support”, Watrous explained to Asllan, casually flipping through a French art history book that was on the coffee table.

Watrous had joined the Royal Artillery only a couple of years prior to coming to Albania, yet he had quickly ascended through the ranks. He was softly-spoken, with a charisma more reminiscent of a school teacher than an army man. He had an excellent grasp of the facts and a remarkable memory: effortlessly recounting the ammunition, clothing and food he had supplied to the partisans, recalling biographical details of officers killed or injured in battle, and even citing page numbers of detailed intelligence reports he had shared to aid the partisans.

Sometimes it was difficult to discern from his remarks whether Watrous was speaking seriously or jesting. When Asllan commended him for the outstanding knowledge of Albanian affairs he had acquired in a remarkably short period of time, he shrugged with a mysterious air. “Oh, I only know the folk tale of Kocamici, that’s virtually all we were taught in the staff courses in Cairo”, he said nonchalantly. Then, to everyone’s surprise, he recited in flawless Albanian: “*Kocamici fell in the pot / The old woman tore out her hair / The old man tore out his beard / The magpie tore out his tail*”.

‘Who is this Kocamici?”, Robinson asked laughing, “I’ve been here longer than you and never heard this story”.

“A mouse adopted by an elderly couple of peasants as their child”, Asllan explained, “who fell into a pot on the stove. Typical Balkan story of longing, attachment and destruction”.

“And yet”, Watrous interjected, “it saved the life of one of our colleagues when he was caught between rival guerrillas in the mountains. He had a gun on his head and no other words in Albanian, but when he started reciting Kocamici he was spared. The British mouse at least was saved from the pot”.

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The next time Leman encountered Major Watrous was a few weeks later, at a grand rally in Tirana, marking the city’s liberation from the Nazis. Amidst a sea of thousands gathered just outside Hotel Dajti, they found themselves standing side by side. He was accompanied by Brigadier Dante Edward Hodgson, the recent head of the British Mission to Albania, to whom Leman was introduced. As they watched Enver Hoxha deliver an impassioned speech from a podium erected for the occasion, she told them about that first time she had met him at Cafe Kursal, and her mind wandered to the faint scent of onion and lavender, the cane he leaned on, how he kept staring at himself in the mirror from time to time. She then recalled their subsequent encounter at the liquor shop, following the Ahmet incident with Robinson, when Enver had adopted the alias of Taras and asked Asllan to save those antifascist leaflets. The last she heard of Ahmet, he had joined the resistance in the mountains, only to later abandon it after a confrontation with the Yugoslavs.

Beside Enver on the podium stood a little girl, no older than nine or ten, her dark plaits cascading down her back as she held a gun pointed skyward, and wore an ammunition belt.

The mood was a mix of astonishment and jubilation, yet Leman couldn't shake the eerie feeling stirred by the image of that girl, as if not peace, but a new war was being announced. Once the speech was over a parade started, peasants in traditional colourful costumes cheered — it reminded her of King Zog's wedding. Then partisans marched in front of the crowd singing patriotic songs, and brandishing multiple Albanian flags. In the very back row, barely visible, there was also a flag with a hammer and sickle.

"Finally, we can also have a little celebration", Leman said to the British officers as they made their way back together once the festivities had ended. "We're hosting a ceremony to cut Zafo's hair, it's a traditional Albanian custom we've postponed for some time. It didn't feel right to celebrate while people were still fighting. You're all warmly invited".

"I should be delighted", Hodgson replied. "I expect there will be new elections in Albania soon. Your first truly democratic elections. Now that would also be something to celebrate, if the communists hadn't already started preparing for that too. I worry a little"

"Why?", Leman asked, genuinely curious.

"There's very little opposition to them left. The few individuals we trust have had no time to organise in party lists or coordinate on a joint programme. People in remote areas barely even know who they are - they will run as independents but I am not sure what chance they have. If the blueprint is coming from the Comintern, there will be trouble…"

Intermezzo: Report on the Present Administration of Albania

Albania, 30th April 1945

The F.N.C. [National Liberation Front] is still firmly in control of the country. Control is maintained by overwhelming armed force, rigid checking of movement, periodical raids on houses and the suppression of any form of popular expression. Due to the large quantity of arms supplied to F.N.C. and those captured from the Germans, the present administration is in a strong position to quell any counter-revolution.

There are still no signs of toleration for any political party other than the Communist party.

The attitude of the F.N.C. is essentially pro-Russian and pro-Yugoslav. No credit has been given to the Western Allies for their undoubtedly great help and none is likely to be given for relief supplies.

It would appear certain that after relief has been received and if recognition is accorded, the attitude of the F.N.C. towards the Western Allies will become much colder unless it is still dependent on one or other of them for help of some kind.

A new feature has been the receipt by the British military mission of a certain number of anonymous letters. These underline the purely Communist designs of the Government and call for our intervention to prevent Albania being sold to the Slavs.

We are regarded as responsible for having helped the F.N.C. to power by the provision of arms to fight the Germans, and they regard us, somewhat logically, as responsible, therefore, for putting matters right again.

BRIGADIER D. E. P. Hodgson
Commanding British Military Mission

Intermezzo: Asllan's Deposition

Excerpt from Investigative Judicial File nr. 1384

Death to fascism
    Freedom to the people

Statement made, and signed today, on date 13 June 1947 in the Directorate of the Prison for the Enemies of the People, in front of me Captain M.S, in the presence of officer N.P. by defendant Asllan Ypi. […]

I saw the Anglo-Americans in June 1944 for the ceremony for my son's first haircut. I had invited various relatives as well as Watrous and Robinson. They visited my house frequently: we had dinner together and drank cognac. I have also met them several times at Dajti, Valbona and elsewhere. On various occasions, I expressed myself as follows:

The popular democratic government of Albania is a dictatorial government. They kill, imprison, and pass judicial sentences in an arbitrary way. The measures taken by the organs of the State Security are harsh and extreme. I said that in Albania, there is no freedom of speech or press. Only communist elements can write freely while others are censored.

I said that the leaders and main managers of the state occupy important posts not because of their experience or competence but because of the trust they enjoy as members of the Communist Party. For the same reason, there is also great confusion about the system of nominating popular judges in ordinary courts: such judges do not have technical legal experience and are unable to interpret the laws, therefore they continue to take decisions undermining them.

I said that taxation laws are a proxy for expropriation. People are not taxed on the basis of their profit, but of total capital.

I said that in the various exams offered by the state, the most able and competent citizens are not selected: only trusted people are favoured. Around that time I had applied to enter a state exam and felt that I was unfairly excluded. I wasn't offered the position even though I felt very confident in the French language.

On this occasion, I also said that there is no longer a place for us in this country, and wondered why we are not granted passports so we can all move to Turkey or to other countries to join our family relatives. I found Order no. 4 of the Internal Ministry, concerning the forced removal of unemployed people from Tirana, to be excessively harsh. I pointed out that the complaints of people affected by this measure have not been considered.

On one occasion in Cafe Splendid, I analysed the speech given by Winston Churchill in Fulton in the United States and concluded that there is going to be a war that will quash the new people's governments established in Eastern Europe, such as Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania and Poland.

Of the Anglo Americans I have spoken to the following people: Watrous, Robinson, and Brigadier Hodgson. I met with the first two in particular so many times that I don’t even remember, both at my house, but also at the houses of others, at Hotel Dajti, Valbona and so on. We had several lunches and dinners together, in the company of the following Albanian people: Leman Ypi (my wife) […] Cocotte Leskoviku […].

When women were present, we never discussed politics or any other serious questions.

With the closure of the English mission, I ended all contact with them. I do not know of the existence of any subversive political organisation.

I deeply regret everything I have done, feel very guilty, and condemn my actions. I don’t have anything else to add. Everything I said is true to the best of my knowledge and I am ready for my statements to be confronted with others as necessary.

The statement was read out to me and I signed it of my own will, without pressure.

Signature, Defendant Asllan Ypi

Intermezzo: Court Decision

In the name of the Albanian people

Military tribunal of the Tirana garrison, formed by the following people:

First Captain A. H. Vice-head

Second Captain S.R. Member

Vice Lieutenant A. S. Member

Gathered in a judicial session on 26.XI.1947 to assist the military prosecutor of the Tirana Garrison, in the presence of Captain F.M. assisted by Secretary Sergeant A.G.

DECISION

Based on register number 683, concerning the charges brought against:

Asllan Ypi, son of Xhaferr, age 32 years old, born in Bitola (Yugoslavia) and resident in Tirana, at 8 Kajo Karafili St, married and with one child, in possession of a higher education degree, former student in France, of Albanian citizenship and merchant by profession, in good economic condition, affected by the People's reforms, during the Italian-German period has not been a member of the nationalist or monarchist movement, no close relatives have fled the country, never sentenced before, arrested on 16 May 1947

Is accused by the Military Tribunal of the Garrison of Tirana of:

0. Having maintained contacts with the English agents Robinson and Watrous with whom he has shared information of a military, economic and political character.
0. Participating in several secret meetings where there were discussions on how to agitate and propagate against the government so as to recruit for a secret group.
0. Working in his social circle with elements dissatisfied with the government and being active in recruiting new elements for a secret group.
0. Being aware of the existence of the treacherous organisation of S.B. (head of the Albanian Social Democratic Party) and working on the basis of the programme of that organisation.

The Court

After reading the official statements of the Security Section against the suspect,

After reading the accusations of the prosecutor's office,

After listening to the suspect's apology, Taking into account the evidence gathered during the trial, the declarations of the suspects, the official statements and declarations related to other suspects, has concluded that it is clear that the suspect Asllan Ypi was part of a secret group conspiring against the People's Power in connection to parliamentary representatives of the Albanian Social Democratic Party, and worked in close connection to British Intelligence Services such as Robinson and Watrous with whom he shared essential information on the economic, political and military situation of our country.

He and his group have agitated and spread propaganda against the Economic Reforms and the Laws of the People's Power in the circle of merchants, property owners, beys, and former civil servants dissatisfied with the reforms.

They have attempted to create insecurity with regard to the People's Power, commenting that soon there might be a change of situation, that the Anglo-Americans will use force to intervene in Albania, and that this will change the regime. This crime of betrayal has been established after the declarations of all the suspects, who have confirmed that they continued to conspire against the government, its reforms and its laws.

The propaganda spread among the people, and the close contact that they maintained with the intelligence agents Watrous and Robinson, was developed over the course of several meetings at the house of Asllan Ypi where Robinson and Watrous were frequently invited under the pretext of social gatherings, in reality to pass subversive orders.

Asllan Ypi accepts that he invited Robinson and Watrous to his house and that they were close friends and discussed political matters.

Though the suspect accepts only one part of the charges, it is clear from the statements of others, for example his cousin Ahmet J., that these activities took place.

Asllan Ypi has always lived at the expense of the people, and seeing that the People's Power was no longer favourable to the interests of his family, decided to oppose the Government and put himself at the service of foreigners.

Since this activity is against Article 3 of Law 372, date 12.12. 1946, Paragraph 10, concerning those who commit acts of espionage to the benefit of a foreign country, and based on Article 8 of Law 373 that considers this an act of Penal Transgression,

The Military Tribunal has decided to uphold the charges against the suspect and condemn as follows:

Asllan Ypi is sentenced to 20 years of prison accompanied by the loss of all civil and political rights as well as the confiscation of his wealth both financial and in kind.

The sentence starts from the date of arrest.

All the expenses connected to the trial are to be covered by the suspect, for the amount of Lek 54.

Tirana, 26 November / XI / 1947.

Signed, Secretary , Member, Member, Vice Head of the Commission.

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The Coat

Leman had been told to wait outside the courtroom while Asllan received his prison sentence for collaboration with the Anglo-Americans. She had not seen him for a few months, since the night he was arrested, on 16th May 1947.

It was a cold day in November, on the eve of the second anniversary of the country's independence. The new Prime Minister, Enver Hoxha, had recently expelled the British Diplomatic Mission. The city was in a festive mood.

As she stood waiting outside the building, drops of hail started to fall on her shoulders, stabbing like daggers. The wind howled, and the umbrella she used to protect Zafo, whom she was carrying, snapped in the gusts.

She had been promised she would be called inside to exchange a few words with Asllan at the end, after the delivery of the verdict. He was part of a group of prisoners accused of collaboration with a group of Albanian independent MPs whose social-democratic leader had been hanged a few weeks prior, following a trial broadcast on radio.

Just as she was called inside, Zafo started crying. He had caught the sound of a military band parading on a street nearby and kept pointing at the window in the long corridor as they marched towards the courtroom.

"Zafo out" he insisted. "Zafo want drum…"

She was trying to calm him while keeping her eyes wide open to see if she could spot her husband. The prisoners were led out one by one in the dimly lit hall, and she recognized a few faces of their distant relatives. Ahmet, who had been arrested a few weeks before Asllan and whom she knew was responsible for having given her husband's name, greeted her with a quick nod of his head. She was tempted to look away but there was something so helpless in his expression that made her nod back with a faint smile.

Asllan was nowhere to be seen, and for a moment she hoped for a miracle.

When the last group of prisoners was being led out, she summoned the courage to ask one of the guards.

"Asllan Ypi…" she said. "I am looking for Asllan Ypi. I was told he would be in this group. I can't see him."

"Ypi? The lawyer?", the guard sneered. "He's there!" He pointed at one of the dejected figures about to leave the hall, a man whose head was wrapped in a bandage, and who had just walked in front of her with a limp, his back completely curved like a turtle shell, his gaze fixed on the floor tiles. Just as he was about to disappear, she caught a glimpse of a familiar grey coat sleeve, the coat they had bought together in Cortina during their honeymoon.

"Asllan?, she whispered. "I did not…I did not recognize you…"

Intermezzo: Deportation Orders

A few months after Asllan received his sentence, Leman received the order to leave Tirana. The following is a copy of a letter found on file Z of archive box 1718 of the Office of the Prime Minister. The letter is in her handwriting, and it was received on 20th November 1948.

I, the undersigned Leman Ypi, born in Greece, am writing to express the following concerns:

During the month of May 1948, a list was published that contained all the names of the families who have been asked to leave Tirana. Within the prescribed deadline, I wrote to explain the difficulty caused by this decision for the following reasons:

1. *Since I am born in Greece, I had nowhere else to go. The place (Leskovik) from which my family originates was burnt down during the war.*
2. *The place from which my husband's family originates (Starje) was burnt down during the war.*
3. *My mother was terminally ill, she could not even move, let alone travel - all of which is confirmed by the medical evidence I sent alongside my request.*

The Urbanisation Commission accepted my request and let us remain in Tirana until my mother's condition improved. The *permission was extended automatically until the beginning of 1st July, on which date my mother passed away.*

I wrote again to the Urbanisation Commission to explain that we still had no place to go to, and that my son was ill with measles. The request was taken into account and I was authorised to remain in Tirana indefinitely.

After my son recovered from measles, I became severely ill myself, with a very bad case of pleuritis which requires special medical treatment and can be confirmed by the medical records attached.

These were my conditions, when on 16th of this month, a police officer knocked on my door to ask me to join him at Police Station n. 1 since I am suspected of not obeying the orders of the Urbanisation Commission. After I explained the situation in detail, I was asked to produce a certificate from the Urbanisation Commission, which the authorities declined to issue.

Since I feel I am not guilty on this matter, and since the accusations are unfounded, I am writing to please ask for you to intervene so that the matter can be reconsidered, the charges dropped, with no further legal proceedings, and so that I can remain in Tirana with my young child.

Leman Ypi

Tirana, 20 October 1948

Street Asim Vokshi, nr. 4

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Comrade Leman

“Madame Leman. Everyone is expecting to call you Madame Leman here. Don’t take offense, we’re not trying to be funny. I can’t quite bring myself to say Comrade Leman either”.

Leman was perplexed to discover the “supervisor” she had been told to contact upon arrival at the cooperative was around ten years her junior. Her suspicions increased when the woman came towards her with open arms, as if to offer an embrace. Perhaps it was part of her supervisory brief to attempt to become friends, she thought and instinctively recoiled. When she noticed the disappointment she had provoked, she regretted her reaction. She did not want her supervisor to think she was hostile, or worse, unwilling to collaborate.

“You can just call me Leman”, she said, trying to show enthusiasm.

“My name is Dafine”, the young woman replied. “The Italians used to call me Dora. You can call me Dora too, I don’t mind if you do, I won’t report you or anything. However, I must warn you, I am very punctual. I don’t care if you are coming from… from where did you say you’re coming from? Kavaja. Well, that’s not far. Some of the other *madames* here have much longer distances to walk. I know you’re not complaining, I’m just trying to be very clear. We want to be a model; we were one of the first groups in the village to merge the land after the agrarian reform and create a cooperative. If you’re late at work, that’s it, our friendship is over”.

Dafine like Dafne, my nanny, Leman thought. Another punctual, Swiss Dafne. Who knows if she can also sing. Except that this Albanian Dafne was her boss, not her nanny. She spoke quickly and with a heavy peasant accent, stretching the last word of each sentence, as if using it as a ladder to climb to the next. She was tall and muscular, with sharply defined cheekbones of a bright red that matched the handkerchief tying back her long, thick hair. She strode around with unusual energy, maintaining an erect posture in sharp contrast with all the curved backs of the women farmers she received in her office on Mondays. She liked to call it “office”, though it was an old horse shed, indistinguishable from all the others except by the stronger smell of human sweat.

It was an early morning in July 1949, and an unbearable heat had already embraced the Albanian western lowlands like an impatient lover, no longer wanted. Leman had been on her feet for several hours, walking through the open fields, when she finally reached the cooperative headquarters in Vorrozen. “Vorrozen,” she thought, what a strange name. She kept repeating it in her head. The way the locals spoke, it sounded as if they mixed words to produce cement: “varr” (for grave) and “ze” (occupies/fits). Vorrozen: literally the place fitted with graves. She lingered on the “r,” rolling it again and again with herself, and all the strong Rs felt like she was using her tongue as a drill to carve out an escape.

The village was inaccessible by public transport from Kavaja, the town a few miles north of the plains to which she and Zafo had recently relocated. The most recent letter Leman had received from the Urbanization Commission stated that her plea to remain in Tirana had been reviewed and denied. She was instructed to vacate the flat she and Asllan had bought after their wedding - within a week, it would be occupied by the offices of the Women's Antifascist Front.

At first, it had proved a challenge to find accommodation in the new centre. She had no acquaintances there, the city was suddenly flooded with other class enemies like her, and in the hierarchy of prison sentences her husband's was ranked high enough that few people would be willing to risk renting to her. Just as she had started to despair, Mehmet, a young local party leader, took pity on Zafo's bronchitis and arranged for them to stay in a barn. He called her Madame Leman too, after explaining that her official position in the cooperative would be that of "assistant worker for the cleaning of drain and sewage", otherwise known as gutter rat. She was to report to the cooperative in Vorrozen at 7.30am the next Monday. On Sundays, she promised to give French lessons to his son.

Dafina asked her to sign a few pieces of paper then accompanied her outside the office shed.

"Do you know what this is?", she asked, searching through a heap of metal tools piled on the ground.

"A shovel", Leman replied quickly, eager to confirm her willingness to work.

"Very good! Have you ever used one?"

"I buried my mother a few months ago".

"Finally!", Dafina exclaimed, then quickly corrected herself. "I don't mean it in *that* way, just that I'm so happy we've finally been sent someone who can identify the tools. I am sorry to hear about your mother of course. How did she die?"

“Stomach cancer”.

Finally indeed, Leman thought sarcastically, embarrassed by the guilt she now experienced whenever she remembered the relief she’d felt when Ismet passed away. She had known for several months that her mother’s days were numbered and had hoped until the end to find her a bed in a hospital or a sanatorium, a sort of one-way ticket to a more peaceful place. None was available. Moreover, every doctor she contacted privately explained it was too risky to visit her at home since it would send the wrong signal to the authorities. Ismet was in excruciating pain and Leman was draining all her savings to purchase morphine clandestinely. It was as if her mother’s soul had been kidnapped by a decaying body, unwilling to release it until the last ransom was paid. When she ran out of cash and had to resort to selling her furs, she wondered how much Ismet had left to fight - not with death, but against life.

Zafo’s health in the last few months had also become increasingly frail. He was prone to chest infections, which caused him trouble breathing, and so Leman divided her nights between watching over her infirm son and nursing her dying mother. When morning came, she had to report to work at the Ministry of Education, where she was temporarily hired as a dactylographist while she waited for a decision from the Urbanisation Commission. She did not mind the exhaustion, but as she slammed the door behind her to go to work, she was gripped by anxiety. She felt singularly irresponsible that she had left a terminal cancer patient in charge of a five year old, or a five year old in charge of a cancer patient.

Leman stared at the shovel in Dafina’s hands, and the sense of liberation she had felt when it was all over - when she turned up at the cemetery to discuss the funeral details with the undertakers - was like an unexpected chill on a suffocatingly scorching day. She had been fortunate enough to meet a manager who agreed to allocate a decent plot for Ismet’s grave in exchange for a small pair of golden earrings. By then she knew the communist revolution did not foresee an easy transition to the other world, and since she had feared the same ordeal for the grave plot as for the hospital bed, she felt as if she’d received a surprise present. The manager’s whisper that class war had gone too far made her suspect he must be an informant - in the end she was relieved it was mere corruption.

Cocotte was the only relative in attendance at the funeral; she had taken a break from the beer factory where she now worked. Every morning, she turned up at the conveyor belt dressed like Coco Chanel, her eyes barely visible behind a thick layer of mascara. Since everything would soon be taken from her, she said, why should she keep her best outfits in her wardrobe? And if she was about to go to prison herself, all the more reason to enjoy the last few days. She happened to be with Leman the evening when the confiscation commission turned up at her flat, and attempted the same strategy, wrapping herself around Dafne’s carpet to protect it from requisition. “Who do you think you are, Cleopatra?”, one of the managers shouted, flicking her to one side, ticking off the finally completed list of items: correspondence, books, clothes, jewellery. That was the last time Leman saw her cousin. The next morning she was off with Zafo.

“Does your family also live around here?”, Dafina interrupted her thoughts.

Leman shook her head. She sometimes wondered if Avni Bey had received her message informing him of his wife's death. For a long time, she had wrestled with the idea of keeping the news secret, thinking that perhaps she owed him more compassion than truth. Now she just hoped her father - whom she was certain she would never see again - had not received the letter, that he would never know Asllan had been trialled and was in prison, that his daughter and grandson were deported to Kavaja. She hoped that though he must have imagined their lives to have taken a bad turn, he would never find out just how much worse reality was.

She pictured him alone in Salonica, knocking on office doors, gathering information on family reunification, receiving elaborate explanations on the procedures concerning Greek citizens of Albanian origin, reading about the law passed during the Italian occupation which declared Albania an enemy state, wrestling with the confiscation of his properties, contacting lawyers, defending his rights. Rights? She frowned as if she'd heard a foreign word.

"And do you know what this one is?", Dafne asked abruptly, rummaging through another stack of tools. "It's used to separate hay".

Leman nodded.

"Good!", Dafne exclaimed. "What is it then, tell me. It's not that I don't believe you. I was up in the mountains fighting, and the beys always lie, that's why we have to check".

"A pitchfork", she whispered.

"What did you say?", Dafina shouted.

“A pitchfork”, she repeated louder.

“Wow, well done! Have you seen it in a film or something?”

Leman made an absentminded gesture with her head.

“I’ve never seen a film in my life! It must be amazing. Only the bourgeoisie was allowed to go to the cinema in the old days. I was told in films people look like real life. Do they look like real life?”

She nodded again. It would have been difficult to explain that the film she had in mind *was* real life, but that it had been shot such a long time ago it was now difficult to think of the main character as still herself. She stretched her arm to grab the farm tools Dafina was handing her, and remembered the peasants and workers who, in warm summer evenings, would gather for rallies at the White Tower just as she and Shefikat returned from their evening strolls.

“That one, with the rusty metal end that looks a bit like Poseidon’s trident is a pitchfork”, her aunt would explain, “and the other one, with the curved blade shimmering in the sun is a sickle, and it’s used for cutting the grass”.

It was always the tools that Leman noticed first, then the people. Muddy shovels, rusty pitchforks, sharp axes, all pointing at the sky as if they were strings holding marionettes, moved by some invisible hand high above. She remembered how the first thing those marionettes did, as they arrived at the square and gathered around the podium, with their faces the colour of exhaustion and sweat dripping off their necks, was to sit on the ground and remove their shoes.

Instinctively, she looked down, as if searching for a place where she could sit too.

“Your limbs will hurt the first few days”, Dafina said as if she’d read her mind. “It’s normal, you get used to it. Sometimes, I sing when I work. Singing makes it easier, it makes the time pass faster. But we must not think about the time. We must not just hit our production targets but exceed them. We’re trying to be a model, like I explained. For today, you can take it easy. Tomorrow, I’ll show you to the sewage works. But even if you take it easy, remember, we must always perform above expectations, not under them”.

“You see”, Shefikat would tell her, “Jews, Greeks, Turks, Armenians, they sometimes don’t understand each other’s languages, they can’t even read and write, but they want the same thing, to be respected for their work.”

Leman remembered how she would stare at those dirty calloused hands, the suffering looks of the peasants and workers that filled the square, the men who staggered drunk, the impatient mothers who carried children on their backs, and she remembered how she was sometimes frightened by their eyes bulging out, by the disfigured expressions on their faces, by their hostile, angry, tired looks. And now those eyes were her eyes, and she still wondered what this respect looked like, perhaps it was a beauty one could find only after excavating in the mud, like a hidden treasure. Or perhaps it was just another word for another layer, perhaps it was nowhere, perhaps Gustav was right.

Dafina showed her to the trench she was supposed to dig, and she set to work. She started thinking about when she was still a child, how visitors to their house referred to her grandfather Ibrahim Pasha as one of the Sultan’s most trusted “dignitaries”, and how she would stare at his painting in the salon for signs of what his dignity consisted of. Back then she pictured it as a present wrapped in silk ribbons, or as a velvet cushion adorned with shiny golden medals, but Shefikat had explained that dignity was nothing one could see, smell or touch, only a property one would find by searching deep, very deep, inside.

She shovelled further into the ground, and the stench of the earth filled her nostrils. She remembered how she had once asked Avni Bey if he would bring her to visit the tobacco fields her family owned. They were holidaying in their villa by the sea, near Volos, but she was tired of sunbathing on the veranda. “Tired of sunbathing”, she thought with irony, as the midday sun scorched her back. “I want to see what the workers look like when they work in the fields”, she had said. “And I want to ride on a donkey”.

That morning, she had been fortunate to find a ride on a donkey for the last few hundred metres of her morning walk to Vorrozen. She wondered if she would be as lucky in the evening, on her way back. She shook her head as if to chase the thought. She shouldn’t complain right away, not even to herself. After all, the walk was not nearly as bad as when she’d been for that first meeting with Asllan, in prison, around New Year’s Eve. It was in Burrel, in the far north, and much harder to reach than her village. Still, the truck drivers with whom she hitched a hike had not harassed her as she’d been told to expect, on the contrary one had offered her milk. Perhaps she was lucky, or simply not attractive enough, or perhaps it had helped that she was all dressed in black after her mother's funeral. But the week before, the black of the mourning had not helped, with that old man, the party secretary, who'd asked her to come alone for an appointment to review the urbanisation decision. He had still managed to tear through her black tights, and her black velvet skirt had been no shield. Fortunately, it rained when she left, and the blood on her knees washed out quickly, but she smoked so much afterwards that her chest hurt, and the pain lingered even the following week, when the time came to visit Asllan.

It had taken three days to arrive at the prison in Burrel, and the meeting had only lasted half an hour. She had not expected to spend most of that time going over the rules: how and how often she could request permissions to visit, what she was and wasn't allowed to bring him. Asllan had smiled once and she instinctively had turned her head away, not daring to inquire what happened to his front teeth. Now she wondered if he had noticed, if he would remember her reaction and think about it in his cell, until the next appointment, when she would reassure him, he still looked like himself, or when she would not be able to assure him, because she was unable to lie.

Then, towards the end of their time, she had mentioned all the food she had brought him - such a foolish thing to say out loud in front of everyone, the other women visiting their relatives had later pointed out. The menu sounded delicious, and the pots smelled too good, they were guaranteed to never reach Asllan. Next time I must mix it all up so that it looks disgusting, she thought to herself, as she cleaned away a stack of horse manure. Earrings salad, bracelet puree, necklace pudding - for some reason she could not remember what exactly she had cooked, only the jewellery she'd had to sell to purchase the ingredients, all that jewellery in one pot, mixed up to look like vomit, to nauseate even the least discerning, the hungriest of prison guards. She would excel in this, she would do it even better than that woman, Mimika, whose husband was condemned for treason, who was so skilled at concealing prison food in revolting pots that she was teaching others how to create layers of foul-looking dishes. Until very recently, when Mimika lost her mind and started mixing random ingredients, until she left a razor inside a soup and the police caught it and nearly arrested her, until on the way back from Burrel she hitched a hike with one of the infamous drivers, until later that week she cut her veins with the same razor.

Leman felt angry suddenly. Her shovel was digging faster, her arms moved automatically. Of course, it had occurred to her too to kill herself. She'd even thought about *how* she would do it, she'd hang herself with a fishing rope. Doctor Elias used to say this was a clear sign that patients truly meant it: the more specific the plan, the more serious they were. Who were these patients? Still, in her case it was more like a treat she could never afford. Who had given her permission to act as if only her desires mattered? What right did she have to force her son to grow up in an orphanage?

Her face twisted in a grimace of pain when she thought of Zafo. She had left him with the new neighbours, they seemed trustworthy, a young couple from a nearby village who now lived in the villa of former collaborators. It was a good thing that he had now stopped asking about *papa*. He accepted it would take his father a long time to return. He even seemed to understand when Leman explained that Asllan had gone to university to study French somewhere in B.

She spent that first day at work digging trenches; the shadow of Shefikat above her sunburnt shoulders. At one point, her aunt had slipped out of her life like a visitor in the night. Now she seemed to have returned, the engine of memory had ground to a halt: the summers in Volos, the walks back from Beschinar gardens, and that final question about whether one ought to abandon a room full of smoke. The feeling of guilt, which had tormented her all her teenage years, had at one point disappeared, when she realised Shefikat's question was not hers to answer. Still, the riddle now presented itself again, and it had taken a new form. Should she run away from the fire and the smoke? Perhaps she would instead try to find where the flames started. Perhaps she would ask for help or look around to see if there were other people to help. Perhaps she would… she could no longer think clearly. Volos to Vorrozen… what was the point of it, shouldn't one simply go, find freedom, find dignity? Vo, vo, vo… she kept saying as if trying to chase an angry bird flapping its deadly wings around her brain, *volare*, *voler*, flying, stealing from life, from death, and then fitting in the grave, fitting out of life, flying for eternity. Why was she always thinking about graves, it must have been the influence of Doctor Elias. He had made her obsessed with the dead, with how they carry on speaking to us, they call us, they ask to be looked after…

It was becoming dark when Dafina called to say it was time to go home. For the first time all day, she lifted her eyes from the trench she was digging and stared at the horizon. Her head was spinning, the blue of the cornflowers in the fields looked like the embroideries on her old blue carpet. For an instant she felt like one of those characters from *One Thousand and One Nights*, about to fly back to a past that had not become present yet, to Salonica, to Mount Athos, to the chaos of Tirana when she landed there for the first time, to her honeymoon in Cortina d'Ampezzo, to that split second in which life had still seemed hers to live.

"The communists will win the war, the Allies will win the war… not you…", she repeated Gustav's words in her head. Then she stared at the ground, picked up the shovel she had abandoned, and waved it in the air once or twice like a sword, as if she was a marionette slicing off her string. The sky was now black. The thousand and second night was on its way.

22

We Had Done Nothing Wrong

“I will leave tomorrow… After that it will be too late… too late…”

Gustav’s final sentence that lingered in Leman’s mind for decades, each recollection stirring a different emotion: disbelief, anger, urgency, despair, resignation. It was as if her past life unfolded in new stages of grief with every twist of fate.

When she spoke to me of that fateful meeting, almost fifty years later, she described it without emotion, explanation or interpretation. It was simply a fact - a solid wall she’d struck her head against so many times that, eventually, the wall had become her life.

She brought it up with me in March 1991, shortly after the collapse of communism, when the first waves of Albanian migrants were departing for Italy.

“Everyone wants to leave Albania”, I remember saying. “The port is open, the boats are ferrying people across the Adriatic. Are you tempted?”

“Tempted to do what?”

“Leave”.

“Why? We’ve done nothing wrong”.

It was strange that in contrast to what most people interpreted as new opportunities for freedom, she thought of leaving Albania as exile, a sort of punishment, a wrong she did not deserve. Yet, instead of explaining all this, she told me the story of this German man from Hamburg who had once proposed to her aunt, then years later offered my grandmother a means of escape, insinuating a connection between her move to Albania and those events that had happened in Salonica nearly sixty years ago. “I wasn’t forced to leave Greece like those people now”, she insisted. “I wasn’t poor, I wasn’t desperate. I chose it, and then I had to take responsibility. Asllan was of the same mind. Why would we leave? Why was he asking us to flee, as if we were collaborators? We had done nothing wrong.”

Still, Gustav’s predictions turned out to be accurate, my grandmother said, even if he couldn’t anticipate the details of what came later: the provisional government, the way elections were organised, the lists of independents who had no time to form their own parties and ran with the Democratic Front. We had welcomed some of the changes, the laws passed to regulate trade, land reform, and so on, she said. The British had warned us about property confiscations, and they were certainly more up to date with the details. But it is ironic that the only offer to leave came from a Nazi.”

“Do you know what became of him?”

“I don’t even know what became of my own father”.

I asked if she would have accepted his offer, had she known what lay ahead. She shook her head. Still, the question seemed to make her sad.

“What’s the point?”, she asked me in her usual, calm voice.

“I fought with this for so long. I fought with myself. I felt responsible, guilty, then stupid. So very stupid. Now I think this was all wrong. Blame… what good is blame? Blame is so cheap. The point is not to blame. It’s to understand”.

23

To Understand

When my grandmother first told me about Gustav's offer, I remember asking her what it was like to realise her freedom was gone forever. "I was never unfree," she protested. "What most people take for freedom is in fact a sort of slavery to passions: fear, greed, envy. I think we're only free when we try to do the right thing."

But I now wonder what this means - if there can ever be a right life in the wrong one. Asllan served his prison sentence in Burrel for almost fifteen years - so long that by the time Leman told his story to me, she remembered it as capital punishment, commuted into life in prison, then reduced further. She raised Zafo - my father - as a single mother, haunted by the fear of being arrested herself, trying to discern who in her social circle might be an informant and whom she could truly rely on. Her husband returned home in 1960, a few years earlier than expected, thanks to his good behaviour in prison, and to the slightly more tolerant climate in Albania between Stalin's death in 1953 and the rupture of diplomatic relations with Hruschov's Soviet Union in 1961. Upon his release, Asllan wrote a letter to Enver Hoxha reminding him of their friendship at the Lycée, and pleading, on health grounds, for a job as clerk rather than manual labourer. He received a positive response and their lives improved slightly, until the alliance of Albanian communists to China during the Cultural Revolution led to a new crackdown that forced him into early retirement. My father had severe asthma that required regular monitoring in Tirana, but the family was reluctant to return to the capital for fear of being more exposed to surveillance and a new arrest. Leman stayed to work in Dafina's cooperative firm until she reached the retirement age, though in the last few years she was promoted to accountant. Asllan passed away a few months after I was born, on 15 June 1980. I have no memory of him, only of regular visits to his grave.

My grandmother always assumed blame and understanding could be separated, like sheets tangled up in a restless patient's hospital bed. I wonder if she grasped the full implications of her own statement. Calling it blame makes it sound narrow and vindictive, as if we were trying to explain the mysteries of the universe with reference to demons and witches instead of mathematical equations. Yet give blame a more noble, less tainted label - call it, perhaps, *responsibility ascription* and it becomes tolerable, even essential, the key to understanding the nuances of free action.

Still, holding people responsible for their actions entails that there is something like free will, that we believe it is possible to make moral decisions. To say that things could have been otherwise—that one official was required to perform a certain action but resisted, while another complied—implies assuming that they can step out of their social roles and take critical distance on their imposed obligations. History, like nature, is made of patterns, and those are the patterns free human action creates. Knowing *who* caused what, is often essential to understanding *why* it happened.

It took many visits to the archives to grasp all this, to learn to tolerate something I found unbearable at the beginning—a question that awaited me at every turn like a tacky "welcome" mat at the entrance. Welcome to historical injustice. Do you want to uncover the real name of the collaborators? Know who is behind Tribune? Wind of March? The Pehlivan? Of all those random strangers who composed my grandmother's life story like Renaissance artists mixing colours on stained glass? One prayer, one element in the mosaic, one surveillance at a time. Occasionally, a piece of glass breaks—a life is shattered. Do you want to know who it was? The archivists kept pressing me, as if naming names could somehow contribute to mitigating the harm.

For a while, I resisted the urge to identify the informants. Not because I was disinterested, but because I believed it should be the last answer, not the first. I also wondered if Leman would have wanted to know, had she the chance. She was the real victim, after all, even though she is now beyond knowing. Some say the dead have interests that outlive them—they make wills, for example, and we feel obliged to honour their wishes. Sometimes, I wonder if that is just what my grandmother would call '*une façon de dire*,' a way of speaking, a sort of poetic license the living use to conceal what might otherwise seem inappropriate: our irresistible tendency to manipulate everything, to instrumentalize everyone for our own projects. Everyone, including the dead.

Surely, whatever harm my grandmother experienced cannot be undone. Her wishes, her delusions, are simply no more. Perhaps it is all for my sake then. Perhaps I am the one owed the truth, for the traumas the family experienced. Yet I find that too difficult to grasp. I never felt personally harmed. On the contrary, if my grandmother had not decided to travel to Albania, if she had never met my grandfather, if my father had not been born, if he had not met my mother in Kavaja where the family had been forced to move, the events that led to my birth would never have occurred, and I would not exist at all. In the end, my life is owed to the harm she experienced. I came to be not in spite but because of it. Instead of blaming those Renaissance artists, I suppose I ought to be grateful. That also seems perverse.

I keep thinking about one August day in the mid-Nineties when we were watching *The Bold and the Beautiful*, a popular American soap opera, on one of Berlusconi’s channels. One of our favourite characters, who had been pronounced dead in a previous episode, turned out to be alive. Normally, we would have shared a joke or two about how American shows always have a happy ending. Instead, my grandmother became pensive and looked me straight in the eyes.

“When I die, I want you to say a few words about me at the funeral,” she said.

“Alright,” I replied, but the thought of losing her one day hurt, and I felt the urge to show her just how much. “And if I die first, you will say a few words about me.”

“Mais non, jamais—God forbid. You have a long life ahead.”

“But what if we die together? Who will say a few words about us?” I insisted, laughing.

“We won’t need it. We’ll have each other to keep talking.”

Yet when she died, I wasn’t there. I was in Italy, studying for my exams. I managed to make it back in time for the funeral, and as I stared down at the grave, I read out the few sentences

I had scribbled on the plane. I had no tears, no words of my own. But I had a promise to keep.

“Thank you for coming to accompany on this last journey a person who has shown us, by the force of their example, that the only thing in the world that is good unconditionally is a good will.”

It didn’t sound like me. It sounded like something I had just read, something I had been asked to repeat.

“Leman Ypi, my grandmother, taught us how to reconcile love with reason, and how to carry pain with dignity.”

I went on like that, automatically, with a dead stare on the piece of paper I held in front of me like a shield, my right foot involuntarily drawing circles in the mud.

“It’s more than a month since she’s gone,” I wrote in my diary on March 4, 2006. “Am I coping? When people ask how I feel, it makes me furious. How do they not understand that I can’t think about it, I can’t even bring myself to repeat the words ‘is dead’ next to her name? When I talk about her, mainly out of politeness, in response to someone’s questions or remarks, it’s not her I’m talking about. It’s someone about whom I can talk, about whom it doesn’t hurt to put my thoughts into words. I would be lying if I said that I feel sad, or that I am in pain, or that I feel guilty for not being there when it happened. I don’t know how to describe it when the phone rings and I run to pick it up, hoping to hear her voice. My limbs go numb but it’s not a feeling; it’s the absence of all feelings. It’s as if my emotions were under anaesthetic. It’s a fact. Yesterday, I was trying to write an essay on Kant and ended up researching grief. Apparently, it gets better with time, and feelings are superseded by other feelings. I suppose in my case it means facts will be replaced by other facts."

That happened more than twenty years ago, but I remember it as if it were yesterday. I am still trying to correct my mistake, to find the right words, to mark her passing in the right way. I read somewhere that the root of the word "humanity" is in the Latin "humando," to bury. Perhaps this is the ultimate meaning of being human: remembering the dead in the right way. Perhaps collecting facts about her life throughout these years has been a way for me to keep the promise.

And yet, on the last page of her file, the final document I obtained from the Archive for Information and Documentation Concerning the State Security Services boldly asserts I have no right to do so. According to this document, the funeral never unfolded as I recall. Apparently, I never stood by her grave, grappling for words, later asking myself if I had said all the wrong things. This file, the supreme arbiter of truth regarding my grandmother's life, insinuates I'm lying, argues with me. Its reasoning is starkly simple: in the reality it portrays, she and I never met. According to the closing entry on her file, by the time I was born, she was dead.

Intermezzo: A Death Certificate

The meaning of the words never changes, regardless of how many times I read them. The explanation comes at the end of a page marked "Secret", dated 17th March 1977, and signed by vice-director K.I. on behalf of the directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

DECISION TO ARCHIVE OPERATIVE SURVEILLANCE FILE 2B CONCERNING LEMAN YPI

I, F. M., surveillance officer in the Directorate of the Ministry for Internal Affairs in Tirana, after examining the material regarding Operative Surveillance 2B concerning Leman Ypi,

DISCOVERED

that Leman Ypi, born in Salonica, Greece, and resident in Quartier 8, is currently deceased. She hailed from a wealthy landowning family, possessed a high school degree, worked in the Ministry of Education, was married but childless, and held Greek citizenship.

The aforementioned had roots in Starje, in the district of Korçë, but lived for an extended period in Greece, where her father passed away. In 1942, she relocated to Albania with her mother and was subsequently barred from returning to Greece despite numerous appeals.

[…]

On 29th December 1951, suspicion arose regarding her alleged involvement with Greek intelligence services, *prompting her surveillance. During this period, she openly expressed animosity towards the authorities and reminisced fondly about her life in Greece, often expressing a desire to return to her birthplace.*

By 1958, with no evidence of significant enemy activities and the confirmation that information provided by our collaborator, The Tribune, was false (as he confessed upon his arrest and trial for treason), the file was archived in Office Branch 4.

Recent verifications confirmed that the aforementioned (Leman Ypi) passed away on 20th March 1972. Therefore, on 20th March 1972, I made the following:

DECISION

To close and archive File 2B, concerning the suspect Leman Ypi, in the archives of the Ministry of Interior, citing: historical value.

CODA

The Other Leman

The words "historical value" are handwritten in ballpoint pen. The decision bears multiple signatures and is stamped "Declassified with decision taken on 22 May 2022", a few days after I requested access to my grandmother's file. Accompanying the document is a death certificate confirming that Leman Ypi passed away in a hospital in Tirana on 20th March 1973.

I've always been in awe of the archive's power to order the facts. It is after all a historical *a priori*: all statements concerning the reality of things depend on its existence. The archive structures events in the same way grammar structures thought: regulating an amorphous mass of discourse, establishing patterns of transmission, prescribing who says what, when, and with what implications. Those yellow, sometimes barely legible pages, filled with stains and doodles, are the essential links in the great chain that connects my own life to that of my grandmother, and my grandmother's life to that of the young woman she once was.

Every now and then, I stumble upon trivial information, large amounts of data that fail to advance the research. I am like a scientist returning to their lab to check the results of an experiment, only to sigh in frustration when they realise it has failed. I sigh too. Then I feel guilty. Surely, it's wrong to think of the archive as a lab; surely my grandmother is more than the object of a social experiment. Perhaps it's failure, not success, I ought to celebrate. Exactly when those files *do not* yield the expected outcome, I ought to breathe a sigh of relief. The more inconclusive my findings, the less harsh the repercussions for her are likely to have been. Sometimes I feel like an early modern historian, documenting the trials of witches by gathering evidence based on inquisition records. The harsher the torture, the lengthier the suspects' confessions. Aren't my own motives - knowing more, knowing the right things, knowing why Leman was considered an enemy of the state - the same as those of her surveillors? In the rare moments of lucidity concerning the method of my investigation, it occurs to me that I'm siding with her perpetrators.

Of course, it's always possible to lighten the burden on my conscience, to explain how my motives are noble. I may be after the same facts as Leman's survelliors, I may be even posing the same questions. Still, I have something they lack: the capacity to interpret reality, to reflect on a given pattern, to judge from a different order of values. After all, the power handed to the archive is the same power I'm trying to dismantle. Of course it is.

But what am I to make of the death certificate? Another anomaly in my family's longitudinal study, a new finding I struggle to fit in my database. What if instead of simply reflecting the mechanisms of state power, the archive harbours subversive efforts to undermine it from within? At least that is what Vera, the helpful archivist I consult for guidance, seems to think. She doesn't phrase it in quite the same way, the nuances of the historical a priori don't concern her that much. Still.

As I present her with my grandmother's file, and puzzle over the mystery of the death certificate, she sets her coffee cup down, pulls out a pair of thick glasses and begins to read. Her bewildered expression mirrors my own, her confusion is palpable. But she sits perfectly erect on the chair, holding tightly the file between the opened palms of her hands, like dams trying to prevent the flood, stopping the written apocalypse.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with The Office, and The Office was the Word.

Suddenly, she lifts her eyes from the document.

"Here we go!", she shouts. "This explains everything".

She reads out a sentence, an utterance concerning a stranger that I have barely noticed on my first read.

"*In 1958 given that no evidence of obvious enemy activity was found, and given that the information provided by our collaborator The Tribune proved to be false (as he himself admitted upon his arrest and trial as a traitor) the file was archived in office branch 4".*

"Isn't it extraordinary", she says, "your grandmother was wrongly pronounced dead, so that the secret services could no longer keep track of her".

She rereads the sentence, this time infusing it with poetic emphasis: "*as he himself admitted upon his arrest and trial as a traitor*".

"You see", she insists, "the Tribune paid for your grandmother's life with his own".

Who knows who this Tribune was, she muses, now returning to her coffee cup, looking out of the window. Perhaps he was in love with her. Perhaps he simply had enough. Perhaps he wanted to be a hero.

“Your grandmother had to die on paper, so that her real life could be saved”. She seems a little irritated by my silence. “Isn’t that beautiful?”.

I nod.

“A noble lie”, I say.

“Exactly! A noble lie!”, she exclaims after me, “one that benefitted your grandmother. Not the frequent, predictable, always disheartening explanation of bureaucratic mistakes. Some people never lost their dignity, even then”.

There is a short pause, she finishes her coffee and flips the cup upside down so she can later read the patterns. She scrolls the file again.

“The Tribune…”, she repeats. “Do you want to know who it was?”

She says it with an ironic smile, as if she already knows my answer. But the question has now acquired a new meaning. If Vera’s interpretation is true, there is no longer a villain to chase but a hero to celebrate. The Tribune, a true tribune of the people, an ally to the oppressed, an enemy of the system he himself helped create. Surely, *his*, *her*, *their* real name deserves to be known, to show that morality is within reach, that not every perpetrator acts in accordance with the demands of their role, that there’s more agency than we think.

I nod.

We are so used to blaming people. The Tribune is most likely dead now. Yet wouldn't it be uplifting to find in these files, in this unlikely frozen pit, someone who saved my grandmother's life instead of ruining it? The archive, not as the archaeology of knowledge, but as its fairytale.

"I do want to find out", I say.

"Then you ought to get in touch with Çim", Vera suggests. "He knows The Office inside out. He will tell you where to start searching for his identity".

I think about how it all started, with that photo of my grandmother's honeymoon in Cortina that I discovered on social media. Back then, it seemed imperative to find the original, to rescue my grandmother from the trolls, to restore her dignity after death. Yet, here I am, three years, five countries, eight archives, and several thousands of pages later. There is no trace of that photo - it might as well have been the product of artificial intelligence.

Still, I know what my grandmother would say. The photo as such was never important, it was always about memory. The past is never past, it's like a distant relative who continues to age far away, as we are busy taking care of the present. It changes, it becomes bitter, it starts to resent us. Memory, she would say with Augustine, is the stomach of the mind, it stores things without consuming them. Then she would tell me the story of her own grandfather, Ibrahim Pasha, of how he died in strange circumstances, exactly when she was born. And insist that the point is not exactly *what* we remember, but *how*.

I hesitate a few days, then decide to contact Çim.

“It’s not about the photo”, I hasten to say over the phone, “I have given up on that. But I want to research a collaborator called the Tribune, who I think interfered with my grandmother’s file to save her from surveillance. He must have inserted a false death certificate, and I would like to find out who he really was. I wonder if you can help me. We’re constantly trying to find perpetrators. This one is a hero to celebrate, a different story for once”.

“Do you have the pdf?”, he asks. “Send me the file and I will take a look”.

Half an hour later, his reply comes.

“Dear Lea”, the email says. “There are no heroes in this file. The file does not belong to your grandmother. It’s about another Leman Ypi”.

Alarmed, I ring him back.

“That can’t be right”, I insist, “I recognise the biographical details, some of the names, some of the addresses… and the character descriptions, it must be her. It’s true that some of it is a little confusing, I have been wondering about that. But the Tribune…”

“Some information is right, and some is wrong then?”, he repeats sarcastically.

“Yes, yes, that’s it. My hypothesis is that the Tribune…”

“You’re desperate to find some good communists, aren’t you?”, he laughs. “Well, I hate to disappoint you. Nobody tried to save your grandmother. Do you have the file in front of you? Can you read the parents’ names in the death certificate?”

“Of course”. I bring out the file. “Qerim and Nurie”. There is an awkward, embarrassed, silence.

“I have no idea who these people are”.

“Because they are someone else’s parents. There was another Leman Ypi, and those were her parents’ names. She died on the date specified in the certificate. I have no doubt about this. Her photos may be in the office too. Though you are of course free to fantasise”.

I return to my pile of documents, and go through every file again. The other Leman Ypi can no longer be unseen, her past screams through every page. She is just like my grandmother, except that she is *not* my grandmother. Just like my grandmother, she is born in Salonica on the eve of the collapse of the Ottoman empire, of Albanian ethnicity and Greek citizenship, wealthy landowning family, privileged social status. All of a sudden, borders change around her, the limits of the world become the limits of her language. She has to prove she belongs in the very country in which she was born. She decides to leave instead, just like my grandmother. She moves to Tirana, her mother joins her, her father stays behind. Her life, like my grandmother’s, is made of fragments. Some of those fragments are now in my hands. Before and after communism. And the second half is also remarkably similar: Leman Ypi is suspected of plotting against the newly formed communist state, placed under surveillance, categorised as 2B.

I try to imagine what her life would have been. Her files suggest that she had a fiancé in Greece, who died during the Italian invasion. Here the differences start to appear. She must have been in love when she left Salonica, she must have already experienced before the war the separation from her partner that my grandmother would only come to know after. But then why did she choose to leave? Perhaps she left Salonica for entirely different reasons from my grandmother. Perhaps she was more like Shefikat, intelligent, educated, and forced to marry a man she despised. She might have loved life more than Shefikat, and decided her room free from smoke was in another country, that her dignity could only be found in exile. I re-read the surveillance reports and there is a line I had always assumed either referred to Cocotte or was evidence that my grandmother was reluctant to mention her husband in prison: “Throughout our friendship, we often talked about personal things and her only preoccupation seemed to find a husband”. But why did she then later insist she wanted to return to Greece?

I go through all the files again in hope of understanding better how her life has unfolded. But I have no stories from this other Leman, I don’t know her character, except for the descriptions in the surveillance reports. “Proud and stubborn”, are the two adjectives that most frequently recur, in which I thought I always recognised my grandmother. Perhaps every woman who left Salonica on her own in the middle of the past century had to be proud and stubborn. Rather disturbingly, everything I conjecture about this other Leman, inevitably relies on the stories of mine. When I return to the surveillance reports I can no longer tell who is who, mine or theirs, family or stranger. Only facts are listed, facts without interpretation, facts now highly illuminating, now completely obscure, sometimes fully aligned to the stories I heard from my grandmother, sometimes in sharp contrast to everything I learned.

In the end I am forced to admit that Çim is right. There is not one “object” of surveillance but two, some of the reports depict the life of my grandmother, some the life of the other Leman Ypi. The Tribune is no exemplar of virtue, but human, all too human. Far from intentionally misleading the authorities to save my grandmother’s life, he was entangled in a web of bureaucratic mistakes for which he was later blamed, and that ended up costing him his life.

Now, a new burden weighs on my shoulders, like the weight shifted between the Wasters and the Hoarders in the fourth circle of hell. How am I to record all this? How should I separate this stranger’s truths from the words I owe my grandmother? How does one think about dignity in the middle of all this?

I begin to research the other Leman. I try to find out if she has any descendants. I will contact them to explain what happened, and rely on their stories to disentangle the files. I mentally prepare for a difficult meeting. I never intended to violate your privacy, I will say, never wanted to intrude. I stumbled on the secrets of your family inadvertently, just as I was trying to unearth those of mine. Perhaps we can work together to separate the two stories, identify the perpetrators, restore the dignity of victims. Reconciliation will come by accident in the end, but there is no doubt it will come.

As I continue to make enquiries in various offices, interview historians, read more secret service reports, expand the research on wartime Albania, all sorts of curiosities emerge. A memoir by Vandeleur Robinson, recording his experiences in Albania, featuring an extensive collection of photographs of donkeys though there are no traces of my grandparents. The diplomatic notes of Lieutenant Jacomoni, including his respectful exchanges with my great-grandfather Xhafer Ypi. And my favourite item: an FT article about luxury property in Southern Europe. A large family home in the island of Paxos, almost facing Albania, has just gone up for sale for five and a half million pounds. The surname of the owners catches my attention, on a bus journey back from the prison of Burrel where my grandfather spent what was left of his youth. The five bedroom villa was purchased by Elliott Watrous, yes, *that* Elliot Watrous, a few years after leaving Tirana to join the BBC Overseas service, around the same time my grandmother was sitting in a courtroom, waiting to recognise Asllan's coat. I wonder if my grandfather would have still ended up in Burrel if he'd never met Robinson on his honeymoon in Cortina, and if he'd never discussed politics with Watrous. I send the article to Vera, who knows everyone in the files, followed by a joke. "I should ask for a few weeks of free holiday in Paxos as compensation for historical injustice". "Didn't your family already receive the ten-thousand-euro reparation for your grandfather's years in prison", she replies. "What more can one want from this bankrupt state?"

It's difficult to say. My grandmother is dead, and I am a product of the system that ruined her life. Yet I've never considered myself its victim. To pretend otherwise is to make a mockery of her suffering. Still, one cannot be indifferent. Truth matters, perhaps not so much because there is a way of compensating people for the harm suffered by their dead relatives, but because there are lessons to learn. Socrates' slave, Meno, was right: all knowledge is a form of remembrance. That's why I am so keen to find the other

Leman's living relatives, share with them her secret life in the security service files, see how what I have just uncovered fits with what they remember of her. That's why it's so upsetting when I discover there are none.

None. It is not easy to adjust to the thought that I'm now the only custodian of Leman Ypi's memories. I return to the files and what I thought were inaccuracies about my grandmother's life turn out to be details that belong to her. I learn that her mother passed away not long after the war, that Leman was always by her bedside, combining her daytime tasks in the Ministry of Education with translation and typesetting work which she continued at night, to afford the medicines and rent. Her belongings, her house, the land she would one day inherit, everything is still in Salonica - most likely now owned by the Greek state, if not sold to some overseas investor. She never returned to her hometown, and never saw her father again.

I learn her health was fragile, always had been. At one point, just after the Italian invasion of Albania, she'd spent a few weeks in a Swiss sanatorium. Perhaps it was in Davos, perhaps somewhere else. Just like my grandmother's short residence in the Dolomites - the *other* magic mountain - this detail always appears in the files as evidence of her subversive activities and bourgeois lifestyle. Who knows if she ever learned to ski. Who knows if she could dance the waltz.

I learn that when she was in her late thirties, she met someone much older than her, a man of humble origins, a party member, a decent person by all accounts. They had planned on getting married, perhaps they succeeded. All I know, from the official documents, is that her surname never changed. Her health continued to deteriorate, and in the end, when she suffered a pulmonary tract infection, she had to be in a hospital in Tirana, where she passed away. There must be a grave somewhere, but it has proved impossible to locate. She had just turned forty-five.

What survives of Leman is now only in The Office. She exists in the form of reports archived in the Files Authority, the only detailed account of her activities, the sole remaining record of her life. What she confessed to her friends, how she behaved, how she experienced her misfortunes, the conversations she took part in, her hopes for the future, all this has been painstakingly collected by the agents in charge of surveilling her. They could have made it up, of course, in whole or in part, someone who needed a promotion, or wanted to avoid being reprimanded, or had to report something just to be paid at the end of the month. I hope not. I hope that those reports capture her essence, her what it was to be.

I wonder if "essence" is the right word. The dead exist only in so far as we are conscious of them in some form. I know of her only through a bureaucratic mistake, something I first experience as confusion, then as a problem of classification, and finally as a moral dilemma. This other Leman is a stranger to whom I feel no attachment, only the abstract sympathy we nurture for characters in stories, perhaps because they remind us of ourselves, or of people we know, or of people we would like to be. But she's no character in a story, she once had a life, fragments of which are scattered in my grandmother's file like half-drunk champagne glasses at the end of a party. Unlike my grandmother, this stranger, this other Leman Ypi, has no granddaughters who can record that life, nobody who can reflect on the meaning of her dignity. And yet, that life surely deserves to be recorded somehow. Wouldn't this woman, if she could, also have wanted someone who could say a few words by her graveside?

In the end, I decide to adopt her, to imagine what her life might have been, to give her the dignity of memory. Since the two women were similar enough to confuse the secret agents who intruded on their lives, instead of cancelling one and immortalising the other, I resolve to write about both, stretching into my words the blurring of characters I found in the archives. I keep thinking about my grandmother's words: what matters is not *what* we remember, but *how*.

As I piece together the information contained in the various archives, I imagine what Leman's life might have been, follow her from the childhood in Salonica to her adulthood in Tirana. I observe her grappling with an increasingly hostile world, trying to make sense of circumstances so remote from the ones in which she is born. I see in her a woman not so different from many other women I've encountered, in books and life, often at the mercy of men, trapped between conflicting obligations to parents, husbands, children, relatives, friends, agnostic in a world where religion shapes who you are, cosmopolitan just when borders tear people apart, sceptics who find strength in doubt. I see how she is the ultimate outlier and the ultimate enemy, how she threatens fanatics of all stripes simply by managing to survive, how she insults by embodying a highly subversive stance: that family, class, race, religion, country, can constrain but will never fully determine who you are.

I see how she is first ridiculed for her reluctance to compromise, then silenced. How unbearable she is. And how alone. “An animal cannot do anything other than free itself from the pain, but a human being can decide to suffer”, the troubled poet Friedriech Schiller confesses in an essay written shortly after the French Revolution. There is so much suffering in these files, and in the memories I carry, and in all the archives that I will never access, in those that have been burnt long ago, in those that have never existed because not all voices deserved to be heard. She sees everything, experiences everything - the fall of empires, the rise of nations, the trading of people, war and nothingness, the collapse of utopia. She knows that every action has a cost, and she accepts the cost, finding comfort in the thought - and it is only ever a thought - that she’s trying to rule over adversity with moral force. The expression by which this force presents itself into the world, the troubled poet goes on to say, we call dignity.

Dignity? What is the point of dignity? She’s long gone, her struggles have been forgotten, and all the stupidity, the selfishness, the cruelty, the birds of prey acting as lambs, everything she feared, everything she fought, are still there. There is no harmony, no reconciliation. She’s left me to search for the truth, to explain, to say a few words to posterity on her behalf. But I find myself on the verge of surrender. As I sift through the files, her files, it feels pointless. Facts can only be reliable if one trusts the mechanisms through which they are transmitted, if error is no longer possible. I have no faith in my own endeavour, in the superiority of the present to the past. If interpretation is always the result of ideology, manipulation, propaganda, how do I know I’m even thinking my own thoughts? If the harms of the past find ways to linger in the present, how can morality still act as a reliable guide?

There are no answers in what I read, and I only have new questions, the questions of a world so different from hers, and yet the same, a world on the brink of extinction, haunted by war, waving the banners of past revolutions, each promising to reconstitute the human, each claiming to be the last. A world in which the innocence of nature is lost, and the freedom of history is yet to be found.

I begin to write my story, their story, but without being able to shake off a sense of unease, of intellectual voyeurism. I don't know how I ought to feel about the whole matter, and if what I feel is appropriate. If I reimagine the life of one Leman with the help of the other, will I have disrespected them both? Would they rather be forgotten? Am I manipulating them, deceiving people on their behalf? And, most dangerous of all, isn't all culture exactly that, ferrying the dead back into our world without consent?

Still, I am not ready to surrender. There must be hope somewhere, between memory and imagination, in a state that must be created rather than found. Perhaps it takes the form of faith in the redeeming power of art, in its capacity to mediate between feelings and moral imperatives. Does it matter who exactly Leman is? Half-existent, half-constructed, she is a real presence and influence on my life but also a product in the mind of a writer, struggling to understand why history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as a tragedy even greater.

Perhaps the two Lemans have always belonged together, multiple versions of the same humanity. Lost to the past, they are a reminder of how dignity lies in trying to act with a moral purpose, but also a way of idealising the same stance. Reconciliation may be less about reaching the end of a process and more about finding a path through the conflicts of the present. If that’s the case, perhaps the truth about Leman Ypi lies only in part in the reconstruction of the facts about her life. Just as valuable is the interpretation of those facts, the story they tell, the moral light they cast on the world. Or the catharsis encouraged by reflection on how things could be different - indignity defied through imagination.

Notes

[←1]

“Are you also Albanian?”